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# The Seed Thief

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**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the award of the degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing**

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

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## *COMPULSORY DECLARATION*

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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## Abstract

At face value, *The Seed Thief* is a contemporary quest story. Maddy Bellani, a botanist with the Millennium Seed Bank in Cape Town, is sent on the trail of an African plant thought to be extinct on the continent, and believed to be growing in Brazil.

Maddy is a reluctant heroine, a botanist of many places but no home, who responds to the call because she believes it might help her put some of her unsettledness to rest. But when she finds herself in a place that shakes her preconceptions to the core, the myths she has constructed to prop up her life and sense of self come crashing down around her.

We are all unreliable narrators; the stories we tell ourselves about our own lives are merely versions of a truth. So it is with the story Maddy narrates to herself as she waits, stuck in transit en route to Brazil.

For the first half of *The Seed Thief*, Maddy reflects on the events that set her on her present journey. In the second part of the book, she is on her return journey, changed. As is her story.

*The Seed Thief* is a book about coming home to truth – or perhaps about coming home to oneself. It is a story about dislocation, disconnection and transience. It is about family ties, about ownership, about the legacies of colonialism and the neo-colonialism that is biopiracy.

And it's about the secrets we keep locked up in the spaces between memories.



# **The Seed Thief**

by

**Jacqui L'Ange**



*The art of losing isn't hard to master.*

~ Elizabeth Bishop, '*One Art*'

University of Cape Town





## Prologue

*A girl on a boat on a river.*

*The river still, the boat motionless, the girl in flux.*

*The water is no colour, or all colours, so dense and dark that it mirrors all the green around it.*

*Trees, taller than apartment blocks, denser than any city, the river a boulevard cutting through them. On the banks the trees reach up, trunks to leaves to sky. Down on the mirrored river course they are inverted, trunks thrust down, leaves reaching out as if to scoop up the girl, to claim her, the sky left somewhere behind her so that she, on her slow canoe, feels herself to be tipping forward, falling. Tumbling into green and flipping back out again. Without moving at all.*

*Sixteen, self-destructive, lost, she floats on the Rio Negro and searches for herself in the reflections of the trees.*

*Reflections double everything. As above, so below. One is real, the other only an image of it. But which is which?*

*Those trees, stately green, exist. She has walked under them, stumbled over their roots. Now she loses herself in their inverted replica, sometimes rippled by breeze, or a passing boat, but always regathering, returning to stillness.*

*Perception or reality? If she were to dive into this image she would know that what lay beneath this surface was something else altogether.*

*Space.*

*Spaces between molecules, pushing up to create an apparent surface, a reflecting meniscus that fooled her eye into thinking there were trees there, and roots there, when in fact there were only fishes.*

*Everything rests on this illusion. Of that she was newly, absolutely, certain. On this duplicitous Amazon, a sixteen-year-old girl with a death wish found that she cared rather too much about life.*

*It's in her heartbeat. And growing louder.*

*The drums pull her back in a dizzying rush, out of the silence and the cool and the green, and into too much colour.*

*Maddy opens her eyes and it swirls in front of her, yellows and blues and red, too much red. She cannot focus. She smells the heat of bodies. Dizzy, dizzy. She looks down at her feet, which seem a long way away. There are other feet all around her, in sandals. The ones on her right are small and thin, with red painted toenails. She remembers seeing them earlier, before she tumbled into green. She longs for the calm of the water, would so rather be there, than here.*

*No sooner has the thought formed, than all hell breaks loose.*

*The woman with the slim feet is on her knees, then on her side, then rolling, spinning out of control over the floor. People step aside out of the way, but no one tries to stop her, or help her. How is it possible to move like that? She is rolling like a log on a river caught in turbulence. Maddy looks for invisible hands, but she knows this is no magic trick. The woman's body has reached the end of the hall, and now it is making its way back again, still spinning. She looks so small and frail, like a child. But the energy propelling her is not innocent. The drums are hysterical and the bodies are whirling, people are shouting and the colours are all running into each other. She is struggling to breathe. Zé – where is Zé? She looks for the drummers through the bodies on the other side of the hall, doesn't see him. She remembers that he wasn't there last time she looked, a moment before she went wherever it is she's just been. There is a shout, and then a series of cracking gunshots from outside the hall. Nobody takes any notice, if anything they become even more frenzied.*

*Maddy feels herself disintegrating.*

## **PART I – OUTGOING**

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## In Transit

[1]

<b>22:50 00:00</b>	<b>HEATHROW</b>	<b>BA573</b>	<b>CANCELLED</b>
<b>23:15 00:00</b>	<b>MUNICH</b>	<b>LH4698</b>	<b>CANCELLED</b>
<b>01:15 00:00</b>	<b>BOGOTA</b>	<b>XA439</b>	<b>DELAYED</b>
<b>02:20 00:00</b>	<b>RIO DE JANEIRO</b>	<b>TP796</b>	<b>DELAYED</b>
<b>03:45 00:00</b>	<b>SINGAPORE</b>	<b>SQ212</b>	<b>DELAYED</b>
<b>05:30 00:00</b>	<b>TOKYO</b>	<b>JAL342</b>	<b>DELAYED</b>
<b>06:00 00:00</b>	<b>MADRID</b>	<b>VL5069</b>	<b>CANCELLED</b>

I would curse this volcano, if only I could pronounce its name.

This transit lounge should be empty so early in the morning. Not crowded with people and their sweaty frustrations. Stranded, on hold, their plans undone by a petulant volcano that refuses to stop spewing ash, grounding all flights for an indeterminable time.

I feel zero connection to these fug-headed travellers wandering from one fast food outlet to the next. I see them lugging their time zones aimlessly between terminals, or crouching over their laptops trying to explain to loved ones why they won't be home for dinner. I just want to find my own private island of empty seats, create my own personal no-go zone.

I've colonised a row of three orange scoop chairs, barricaded my space with my backpack on one side, travel literature on the other: Jorge Amado's *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* and *The Complete Poems* of Elizabeth Bishop.

I don't really mind the delay. Not yet. Transit lounges offer the ultimate in paused potential. There's nowhere else in the world I feel so honestly, anonymously myself. It's the people I can do without.

I like travelling solo. Solitary travellers have no witnesses, no one to confirm or contradict their version of events. No one to impose demands or expectations. No one to require anything of you at all.

It even defies physics. Nature abhors a vacuum, but even with ten tons of atmosphere pressing down on every square metre, transit feels gravity-less. Between the predictable bookends of touchdown and take-off, the transit lounge is a weightless space.

Weightless, but not storyless. These transit people, like any other kind, play heroes and victims in their own private narratives. I have no interest in making friends or sharing stories. I'm avoiding eye contact with all of them. I just want to enjoy this time between what lies ahead and what I just left behind.

If I can pause the looping replay of my failed relationship. If I can suspend my nagging anxiety about this trip. If I can put off calling my father until I'm in the air again, and the urge becomes useless. Maybe somewhere in this limbo space I'll work out how I really feel about returning to a place that formed and defined but never fully held or nurtured me. One of my almost-homes.

*Saudades*, Brazilians call it. Sow –daa – jies. The stretched middle vowel always reminds me of a hammock. It weighs down the word, this longing for something that may not exist outside of sentimental imagination. It's a concept that requires a sleight of mind.

I know I'm missing *something*. I just wish I knew what it was.

Tea?

I really need a cup of tea.

But can I face the bland bling of duty-free, fight the crowds in front of the coffee kiosk for a cup of tepid beige in polystyrene? If I get up now I'll lose my space. And I might be tempted to make that call. And then Lucia will probably pick up the phone and then I'll have to pretend to be nice, which will spoil everything.

But the monkey is there now. In my monkey mind.

I could never forgive Lucia the monkey. It gave me an excuse to distance myself from the woman my father took up with too soon after the death of my mother.

Lucia owned a pet store in Manaus. A place that, even in the middle of the lush Amazon, never lost the feeling of a dusty frontier town. Lucia's main trade was parrots, supplemented by the occasional sloth. She kept a *macaque* on a rope outside her shop that spent its days picking ineffectively at the threads of its tether, looking at me with accusing eyes. I only had to practice monkey-avoidance once a year, during school

vacations. When I got older I just avoided the town altogether. When I visited Brazil I stayed out in the jungle with the plants. And the free animals.

I can see it's raining outside now. It's almost dawn and the tentative light is picking up vague wind-whipped contours in the colourlessness. Hercules, that monkey was called. What a cruel joke to play on the powerless.

Of course I realise my childhood disdain was entirely misdirected. Lucia was never anything more than a placid-skinned, middle-aged *dona* who watched novellas in the afternoons, cooked sweet *pudim* to eat after dinners of chicken, rice and beans, and made few demands. Who could not, or would not, get used to the fact that I drank my tea with milk instead of lemon. '*Cha con leite?*' She feigned surprise every time, hauling herself up to fetch a tin of preserved milk that had come a long way from the cow that supposedly produced it.

Lucia did this year after year, without fail, during every one of my visits. When I decided to study botany, I assumed I would be forever immersed in jungle flora, and putting up with Lucia's sporadic milky surprise for the rest of my life. But then South Africa seduced me with the resilient intricacies of fynbos. And of memory. I found another almost-home, one with a solidly entrenched British colonial-era tea tradition. Found an excuse to put an ocean between my father and me.

There isn't a green plant in sight in this transit lounge. Not even a fake one. This temporary air is not designed to sustain long-term life. There's just enough recycled oxygen to get you through, on a normal day, from plane to plane, or plane to taxi. There are no open windows here, no doors to the outside. On the way to my scoop chair haven I passed a place where smokers sat huddled under a huge metal umbrella designed to look like a beach bar, but was really a huge fan that sucked their polluted air straight up before it could second-hand anyone. Did it get sent out to mingle with jet fuel and diesel fumes, or was it recycled back, air in transit? I don't want to think about the smells that must be gathering in those filters, with all movement ground to a halt. It was bad enough, being on a plane with all those shared odours. I once read about what the ground staff endures, whenever a plane arrives. Someone has to attach the plane to its arrival gate; someone has to withstand the blast of concentrated body odour that gets released when the capsule



pops, the depressurised stench of 300 passengers, slow stewed for hours. All of them digesting airplane food.

I close my eyes, close off my olfactory centre as best I can, and think about green. Not the green I'm going to, but the one I just came from. The botany of a million heavenly smells.

Fynbos doesn't have the grand green majesty, the easy immersion, of Amazon trees. It's a tiny plant kingdom, but contains more plant diversity than anywhere else on earth. Things found nowhere else, intricate and hardy enough to survive the winds and the storms and the fires on Africa's southernmost tip. It's rare and unique and moved me enough to make a life collecting its seeds. Made me a fynbos conservation devotee.

There are teas in fynbos too. Buchu, Rooibos, Honeybush, all fragrant, in their ways. But Ceylon is still my brew of choice. I wonder where my boxes of Five Roses are right now. Stowed with everyone else's luggage in some waiting bay.

I once took a box of Five Roses to Manaus. I remember pulling the small red box, from my suitcase and watching my father go pale and sit down hard on the bed. *Your mother used to drink the same brand*, he said. *You looked just like her, just then*.

It was his first mention of my mother in years. Too overdue to help either of us. Was I sending some kind of signal, with my red box semaphore? Had I made the connection between my mother and the tea, in some hidden, limbic place? At what age does brand recognition hook into the unconscious? Nick would have a theory. Nick, who has been my emotional homeland these past eight years, but is no more.

I need a cup of tea. And to stop thinking about Nick. Although I might even, in time, when the numbness wears off, feel *saudades* for him.

## Cape Town

### 1

Maddy was plucking her eyebrows and contemplating suicide when the phone rang. Or rather, entertaining the thought of suicide. Contemplating suggests some kind of intent. Whereas what she was doing was more like just thinking about it. Which she did quite a lot, in an abstract, if not strictly philosophical, way. She was irritated by the phone's ringing – it could only be from work, and there was a lot she would rather be doing right now. On this, her first day off in weeks. Killing herself was not one of them. Walking her dog, however, was.

She remembers that the day was clear and ridiculously warm, for midwinter. Maybe she could still get a walk in after her meeting. Judging by the holes in the garden, Vavi needed it. So did she – a good dose of green would clear her head after parched weeks in the semi-desert.

Some people like that endless aridness. Maddy needed green. She usually enjoyed the drive to the institute, the road winding up over Constantia Nek, the lines of old oaks, and what remained of the indigenous forests that gave Hout Bay its name. The flat blue horizon of sea bisected her rear view mirror as she drove up the hill. She had never been a beach person – you could keep the sand, sunburn and bikini creep. But she also needed to know the ocean was there, a big blue highway to other places.

She drove too fast around the tight corners. A psychometric profile said she was a 'risk taker'. She wasn't scared of heights, or drops. She'd bungee-jumped at Storms River (highest in the world!). She pushed the limit every time she gunned over Chapman's Peak Drive, thrilling at the vertiginous pull when she looked down from the road into the Atlantic churning against the cliffs below. Wondered what it would be like to feel your car fill with water as it sinks. How she would get out. Whether she would really want to.

Do you open the windows as you plummet, or keep them closed? She could never remember.

On the job she was always the first volunteer to go to the remotest places. Always first over the cliff, first up the waterfall. Her bravery – if it was that – was some kind of shield against her terror.

But she was tired. Deep down exhausted. She was looking forward to hunkering down a while, hibernating through the Cape Town winter. ‘Don’t unpack,’ Kirk had said, which filled her with dread. As if it was not to be, right now; cosy fires, red wine, books. Solitude. He wouldn’t say more over the phone.

She pressed her foot down on the accelerator, felt the back of the car swing out behind as she nose-dived into another corner. Twisting corridors of yellowwoods opening up at the very last minute to let her through. Perhaps a bit of speed would wake her up.

## Cape Town

### 2

Her spirits lifted when she saw how the sun was running down the flank of the mountain, lighting the green amphitheatre below. She paused to pay respect, running her hand over the top fronds of a waist-high confetti bush, ruffling the hair of a favourite child. Crushed a few of the tiny lime-green tips, bringing her hand to her face and inhaling the clean fynbos scent – not quite lemon-geranium, something entirely its own. The cleanest smell on earth.

Some botanists need the whole plant, its leaves and shoots and roots. All part of the miracle, but for Maddy the magic is in the quantum possibilities within the seed.

Between fertilisation and birth, it waits. Life in potentia.

Above her, the seed bank was an alien capsule come to land on the craggy slope that imperialist Cecil John Rhodes once claimed as his own. He infested it with invasive northern oak and starlings, then bequeathed it to future generations who took care of the real, indigenous rarities of this place. Kirstenbosch was a botanical garden of international renown, a fynbos haven, and a satellite repository for the Millenium Seed Bank, a pod supplying the biodiversity mothership docked a world away at Kew Gardens.

Maddy was hiking fit, but the berg wind puffed hot off the mountain, and she was already clammy under her winter fleece. She pulled it off and tied it around her waist, setting her sights on the barrel-vaulted entrance, anticipating the oblong stone pool inside, the whisper of misters that tricked herbaceous borders into thinking they were in the tropics, and not on Africa's temperate tip. Glass doors slid open without a sound to draw her in to the public face of the herbarium, where touch-screen displays waited to educate busloads of distracted children and satisfy donors that their money was well spent.

Through a side door, institutional and less inviting, was the business end of the seed bank. Maddy reached her hand up to the buzzer. The answering crackle was almost immediate.

'Request?'

'Permission to come aboard, Captain.' Maddy pushed down her irritation. She wasn't in the mood to play Spock in Kirk's *Seedship Enterprise*.

The door clicked open and the cool hit her in a blank wave, bearing along with it the institutional stench of Jeyes Fluid and formaldehyde.

‘Hot out?’ Kirk was in shirtsleeves, his greying ginger hair awry, light glinting off his steel-rimmed glasses. He was so tall and lanky, he could have been the model for the ‘Where’s Wally’ character – in her mind’s eye she always put him in red and white stripes. On days like today, when she was feeling particularly mean, she pictured losing him in an arctic environment. Kirk never seemed to feel the cold, despite his skinniness. His native ebullience was its own internal furnace.

‘How was the Richtersveld?’ He talked over his shoulder, loping ahead of her down a passage between long tables where interns and volunteers sorted through piles of dried plant specimens. Some of the succulents she collected on her two weeks away would be joining the trays of samples being worked over here. Bent over their work like seamstresses in a factory line, the workers used tweezers to pluck out very tiny seeds, or sieves to separate seed from chaff. The seeds would be sent north to Kew, where they would be tested and stored, joining 25 000 other plant species from around the world. They’d reached their 2010 target of banking one out of every ten species. But with four plant species being lost globally every day, that wasn’t nearly enough. Someone had pasted a bumper sticker on a door: *Inaction is a weapon of mass destruction*.

In another part of the facility her colleagues would be planting out, testing for viability. This was the science of nature. Maddy recognised some of her student volunteers, nodded greetings before ducking through to the passage where Kirk waited next to the refrigerated vault. ‘Good to have you back,’ he said, as he hefted the sliding door open.

She was still breathing hard, her exhalations clouding in front of her as they entered the storeroom. The temperature was a mild 15°C, but the low humidity made it feel colder. She pulled her fleece back over her head.

Since this was a short-term storage facility, seeds only stayed here three months at most before they were sent to Kew, where they would be tested and stored at arctic temperatures of –20°C. In theory, seeds could be kept for 500 years or more in suspended hibernation. Kirk liked to joke that theirs was a job with great future prospects.

You needed to wear a full arctic suit when you went in to the Kew vault. Low humidity would dehydrate you within half an hour, which was the maximum time researchers were permitted to stay inside. When Maddy visited Kew with Kirk last year, disorientation set in before she'd even registered thirst. She was making mental poetry out of the Latin on the seed jar labels when the buzzer sounded to tell them their time was up. She remembers eyeing the round red emergency button and wondering whether she would be able to get her hand to it without Kirk there to lead her out.

'You'll get used to it,' he'd said afterwards with his lopsided grin. 'Think of it as a decompression chamber.'

She never did acclimatise. And she had never enjoyed a drink of water as much as she did post-vault.

'Any tea on this craft today?' She rubbed her hands together to warm them.

'Of course.' But Kirk made no move towards his office, which had a kettle, and a window out into the sunshine. Instead he turned to the banks of high steel shelving, crammed one tight against the other, with metal armed levers at the side to crank open an access aisle between them.

It always reminded Maddy of a library, one without books. There were stories here to be sure, histories and geographies and family chronologies. Written, not in symbols and hieroglyphs, but in four-letter genetic code, A, G, C and T, with a syntax and a grammar that remained a mystery. Catalogued and ordered according to a system that honoured taxonomy rather than the Dewey Decimal. There were volumes of information here, but a fraction of what was available. And a fraction of what had already been lost or destroyed through plundering, habitat destruction, wilful ignorance, and worse.

Despite the high-tech nature of their work, the seeds were kept in ordinary wide-necked Consol jars, labelled with the kind of stickers you'd find on children's school books, stuck to brown paper wrapping. Kirk picked one up and held it out to her.

*Newbouldia mundii*, Maddy read. She knew the plant, native to West Africa. Its cousin was a common tree, this particular sub-species much less so. Had become endangered when rampant strip mining destroyed the narrow band of coastal forest it called home. It's bark and leaves had been used by the Yoruba people of the African bulge since time

before memory to make remedies for a variety of maladies. Recently there had been talk of potential cancer-fighting properties. Had it not been overshadowed by the interest in *hoodia*, Namibia's miracle weight-loss herb, Maddy had no doubt some pharmaceutical company would have a patent locked away by now.

It always came down to ownership. Maddy's colleagues had spent the last three years fighting to keep *hoodia* in the hands of the people who had traditionally used and tended it, the indigenous San peoples who had no need for weight loss, but survived desert droughts thanks to its thirst quenching properties.

But when locals were offered more than they would earn in an ordinary year to deliver the plant to unscrupulous buyers – no questions asked – they went into a harvesting frenzy. By Christmas, every last bulb had been stripped from the Cape's West Coast. Authorities in the Northern Cape and neighbouring Namibia had stepped in just in time to stop the same thing happening there.

Now that the succulent was protected, it might bring in enough revenue to build schools and clinics and basic amenities for communities in its territories. The same could not be said for *Newbouldia*. The last of the slim, tall trees, once planted before the houses of kings, had been sacrificed to somebody's greed. The inert metallic wealth deep underground deemed more valuable than another pillar of leaves.

Maddy tipped the jar, watched the *Newbouldia* seeds slide from one side to the other. Each one was about the size of a peppercorn, russet brown and spiked, like a Saint-Exupéry planet, or a virus under a microscope. There was a sack of silica gel inside the bottle. Instead of being white, the crystals had turned a faint pink.

'Kirk - these need to be dried out...'

'Too late for that.' He took the jar back from her. 'We tested them last week. No go.'

It's a risky business, seed banking. You never know how seeds will respond to enforced dormancy. Some seeds can last for years – millennia, even. Not long ago, botanists had successfully grown the Chinese sacred lotus *Nelumbo* from a seed carbon-dated back 1200 years. But this was new science, and the uncertainties of method, the urgencies of global warming, and the limitations of human patience did not favour a millennial time scale.

‘Did they X-ray?’

Kirk nodded. A digital x-ray could show whether there was in fact a seed inside a husky casing; whether a worm had got to them first, whether they were blighted, or simply empty.

‘So, someone’s out in the field?’

Kirk shook his head again.

‘Remember that big fire in Benin last year? It took out the last known stand of plants. It appears *Newbouldia mundii* is now extinct in the wild.’ He shook the jar, a little too roughly, she thought. ‘These were the only banked seeds in the world.’ He placed the jar back on a shelf. ‘That’s where you come in.’

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## Cape Town

### 3

Brazil?

Maddy remembers the steaming mug between her hands doing very little to warm her up. Even less so the idea that Kirk wanted to send her on some Mata Hari mission to infiltrate a religious sect and find some seeds.

‘You grew up there.’

‘Well, on and off . . .’

‘And you speak the language.’

‘I’m a little rusty . . .’

‘And your father is there.’

Maddy slid her eyes over the shelf behind Kirk’s desk, to the array of seed-filled jam jars, their silver lids glinting with placid domesticity, suggesting that they belonged in a kitchen, rather than a laboratory. ‘He’s in the Amazon, Kirk. I haven’t seen him for a while.’

‘So, combine it with a family visit.’

Maddy could have told him that, in a country as vast as Brazil, the city of Salvador was about as far from the Amazon as London from Moscow. Which would save her telling him that she and her father were currently estranged. But Kirk’s mind was made up.

‘What about someone from UPP? Theo, or Ntumuleng?’ The field workers for the Useful Plants Program were both specialists in medicinal plants. Technically, they were better qualified than Maddy for this particular gig.

‘Ntumuleng is in Tanzania. Theo’s on his way to a conference in Oz.’

She tried a different tack. ‘Kirk, you know this isn’t a good time for me.’ She watched discomfort leak over his face.

‘I heard about you and Nicholas, I’m sorry. We kept meaning to have you two over ...’

Now it was her turn to feel bad. Kirk’s wife had been battling cancer for so long now it was easy to forget that each day was still a struggle. They had chased the disease around her body with chemicals and radioactivity and surgical interventions, but it was a crafty shape shifter.

‘Forgive me. I haven’t even asked about Gwen. How is she?’

‘She’s holding up. We both are.’ Beneath the mask of good cheer his face was cragged with exhaustion. ‘They’re talking about a bone marrow transplant next. But ...’ Kirk had recently sold a coastal property to cover Gwen’s medical costs. Thanks to the financial downturn, he’d been refused a second bond on his house.

‘About the timing... I meant for tagging.’

She hadn’t, actually. But this *was* the most inconvenient time for her to leave. Her team was experimenting with a new method of tagging bulbs while they were in flower, to better differentiate the plant once the flower had died down and the seeds were ready to harvest. The method itself wasn’t new, but the colours were. Porcupines and baboons had learned to read the botanist’s signs; their red and yellow tags had become an animal invitation to a fast food buffet. So last year, the team tried turquoise and blue tags and found much more intact seed. Whether the animals were colour-blind, or simply hadn’t yet cracked the new code, remained to be seen.

‘Simpiwe can tag without you.’

Of course he could. Simpiwe had infinite patience. In many ways he was more suited to this work than she. But this was her project, and she wasn’t going to give in so easily.

‘Look, I’m sure there’s someone...’

‘You’re going, Maddy. You. I’m pulling rank on this one.’

She was shocked into silence. He tried to soften the blow. ‘I’d go myself, you know. If I could. But there’s no one else I trust with this.’

She remembers making her way out of the chamber of enforced dormancy, its jam jars, chrome and cryogenics, from the chill of the glorified Frigidaire into the heat-fuzzed

daylight, breathing in the sweet warm must of the mountain and feeling a flutter of thrill beneath her resentment. It would be good to get away. *Really* away.

She had carved a niche for herself at the Institute over seven years. This would be a chance to expand her scope. Sure, this was a little out of her ordinary range of activities – way out, to be honest. But Kirk seemed to have made this a personal mission. Securing the seeds for their branch of the Institute would be a coup. It would bring recognition, and more funding.

She sensed something else behind his urgency, too. Maybe this particular medical angle – the potential cancer fighting properties of the plant – had a special significance for him. Maybe he just desperately needed to save something. Still, *she* was the one he was sending into the heart of Brazilian voodooland. Because the place that the seeds were being kept – if, in fact, there were any seeds there – was one of the most fiercely protected, deeply religious places on the planet.

Maddy was to visit the gardens of a particular Candomblé *terreiro*, a temple for the Afro-Brazilian religion whose rites and rituals – among other things – travelled with slaves from West Africa during three centuries of human trafficking. Spiritual survival rituals had been nurtured there, practiced at times in secret, at times in defiance, at times in open protest, and were still today part of the pride and the blood thrum of black Brazil.

Maddy watched an iridescent green sunbird hover over an Erica flower, its wings beating too fast to see as it poked its beak deep into the tubular bloom. She knew enough about candomblé to remember a time when its practitioners had been persecuted. Now it was an accepted part of Brazilian culture, protected and respected, revered by some, feared by others. It was the heartbeat behind the spectacle and the music and the dance that Salvador, Brazil's most African city, showed as its outward face. It was ancient and it was potent. It wasn't something she particularly wanted to poke around in.

But she was a scientist. She would stick to the task. She'd have just over a month – a proverbial 40 days – to travel to Bahia, on Brazil's northeast coast. Visit the place where the *Newbouldia mundii* was rumoured to be growing. Find the seeds. Bring some back. Send them off to Kew, where they would bank them and test them and grow them,

and potentially reintroduce them to the deforested tract in West Africa where they came from. *Newbouldia mundii* would be snatched from the brink of extinction.

Once a viable nursery had been established, the plant would be available for testing and research. That elusive cancer cure might be hiding there, in those virus-shaped seeds. No wonder Kirk was so anxious to get his hands on some.

There would be reams of bureaucratic red tape to untangle. The laws regarding transport of plant material across borders were many-layered. There were international laws, national laws and, in the case of traditional indigenous usage, under which the *terrerios* most likely fell, customary usage laws as well. This was where her 'particular expertise' – namely the fact that she spoke Portuguese and could convince the people in the *terreiro* that their intentions were righteous – came in.

Maddy hated paperwork, and Kirk knew it. But they both knew how crucial it was to have the correct permits, especially in a country as sensitive to exploitation of resources as Brazil.

Which is why Kirk's breezy, 'I'll make sure all the import and export papers are taken care of by the time you actually find the seeds,' left her feeling uneasy.

Or maybe her discomfort came from Kirk reminding her that everyone knew she and Nick were buried neck-deep in emotional rubble. 'On its last legs' people liked to say, applying the cliché equally to flogged horses and relationships. Theirs had been paralysed for the last two years, maybe more. They had almost stopped pretending there was any hope of recovery. Maybe Kirk was right. Maybe a change would do her good. Maybe it was time to do the humane thing and push this cripple off a cliff.

## In Transit

[2]

*Thanks to the new undersea telex cable, it took just four hours for news of the eruption to reach London from the South Seas.*

Sleeping upright – never a good idea. There’s a knob of pain at the top of my spine. I try to rub it out while the man on the monitor comes into focus. He’s talking about the Krakatoa eruption of 1883. Apparently it marked the beginning of modern times. *Just a few years earlier, news of Lincoln’s assassination took 14 days to reach England from America.* It’s been 32 hours since I last lay down flat, but it feels much longer.

Volcano experts must be falling over themselves to get in on the action. This eruption is big news. The news ticker at the bottom of the screen lists airport shutdowns all over the world.

How long was I out? Quick check – possessions all accounted for. Everyone around here is hunkered down, wrapped in resignation. Most of them are plugged into iPods. At least device distraction is one way to get away from the incessant volcano commentary. There are screens suspended all over the transit lounge. I don’t remember them being on before I went to sleep. I’m sorry I left my iPod behind.

I usually like the white noise of concourse buzz. I even kind of miss the ding-dong announcements of my childhood, when flights were so few and far between that each one was chimed in with a cheerful C – E – G. At Jan Smuts International it was done twice – once in English, once in Afrikaans. In the old days, before democracy recognised nine further languages in my mother’s homeland.

I once taught a chorister chat to mimic that chime, on a field trip to the Drakensberg. There was a researcher there – can’t remember his name now – who taught a bird to whistle *The Blue Danube*. I’m not that musical, so while I studied the Afromontane forest I impersonated an airport gong, until the chat began to echo me. I doubt that bird is still around. But maybe he passed the tune on to his offspring. I like to think of them singing it over my mother’s grave. C-E-G; C-E-G...

*The sunsets were spectacular in 1883, Volcano man is saying, even European skies were affected by Krakatoa's donation to the atmosphere.* There's a picture of Edvard Munch's *Scream*, while a Norwegian sounding voice-over reads an excerpt from the artist's diary. *I was walking along a path with two friends – the actor's voice is much younger than I always imagined the painter to be – the sun was setting – suddenly the sky turned blood red –there was blood and tongues of fire above the blue-black fjord and the city – I stood there trembling with anxiety – and I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature...*

I can relate. If they don't get me out of here soon I can imagine getting bent out of shape and agonised, hands over my ears, screaming. This escapist limbo space is turning into something else. If anything, this enforced stasis is intensifying my feelings. It's a pressure cooker. I never realised how much plants, my connection to their cycles and seasons, anchored me. It's hard to be cut off from that.

Maybe that's why I'm distracting myself by imagining my own story. Telling it to myself as if it happened to someone else.

No one else is paying attention to the screen, or the scream. They are all podcastaways, adrift on syncretic atolls, connected to tribes that have little to do with where they were born or of whom, carrying portable MP3 mixes to tune their mood and colour their stories. Instead of Munch-kin hands, they have little white earplugs to block out their terror.

I need to do something. Like find a wireless hotspot and mail Em. The Munch volcano connection is just the kind of factoid my aunt loves to collect. With any luck I'll find a place that serves tea.

Three aunts raised me, each in their uniquely ineffectual way, but Em was the only one I related to. I don't know if it's because she was my mother's sister. Or because she was the one I came to last, as a last resort. After Pittsburgh, and then Baltimore. After my father's sisters, Bella and Dot, both threw up their hands in defeat. I guess I should be grateful they didn't try harder.

The few occasions when we all got together, those rare Christmases when my father visited from Manaus – alone – they liked to call themselves the Witches of

Eastcoast. But Em was the only one with any real witchiness about her. The only one who was truly nurturing – although on paper that seemed unlikely.

Em, the no-nonsense bohemian, with her sharp sense of style, editor and expert navigator of the New York art world. She never missed a deadline, never let a participle dangle or an infinitive split. You always knew exactly where you stood, with Em.

Em introduced me to literature, and to the poets. Made sure I read Eliot's *Old Possum* before I saw *Cats* the musical. Steered me away from the suicide poets – Jonker, Plath and Parker – and toward Elizabeth Bishop. America's greatest poet, she said. Bishop's sensibility was exquisitely lonely. I got that.

Em kept all her sister's art books, shoved in among her own anarchic piles of prose and criticism. She also has the only one of Sarah's paintings that survived the fire. It has volcano red in it, too. My mother left that painting to me. One day, when I have a home with a wall big enough, I'll claim it for myself. Whenever, wherever that might be. If I can bear to live with such a vivid reminder of my mother's emotional demise. In the meantime, while I figure all that out, the painting dominates the living room in Em's Park Slope apartment.

If I'm going to email Em, I have to find someone to mind my space. Not grunge-boy, lying down across four scoop chairs, bucking the ear-wear trend with a bulbous set of old-fashioned headphones. Or the man reading the *Economist*, whose pressed chinos have miraculously maintained their crease. I don't want to disturb the Japanese woman in her velvety pink sports suit; she has her eyes closed in on whatever she is listening to. That leaves the guy with the open face and the tied-back dreadlocks, his paperback folded back so I can't see the cover. I don't know why that always stokes my curiosity, much more than seeing someone use an iPad or a Kindle. Maybe books are just more mysterious. I wait for him to nod his head to my imagined reggae beat, but he keeps perfectly still.

They could all be in one of Nick's 'concept' ads, the kind that work for just about any product. That one that had a cross section of people all plugged into iPods (the ad was for a cola). As the camera zooms in on each person, you hear what they are listening to: the woman in the sari on the London Tube with the country croonings of Jessi Colter; the schoolboy on a dusty bus through war-denuded territory with Tolkien reading *Lord of*

the Rings; the pregnant mother on the beach, her bulge partially eclipsing the setting sun, while the crowd roars exultant to Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream!'; the athlete, sweating rivers at speed, leaping over the syncopated off-beats of Charlie Parker's *Blue Train*. Each juxtaposition carefully chosen to surprise; the concept itself entirely predictable. *I'd like to teach the world to sing, in perfect harmony*. A noble sentiment, cheapened by product association. But I was moved when I first saw it. Nick was good like that.

*All that I push away with doubt and travel, todays and yesterdays alike, like bodies*. I discovered Auden in one of Em's scattered books, copied those lines into a student diary. I don't know why they come to me now. Along with the thought that it doesn't matter how many bodies you bury yourself in. Emotions catch up with you.

I should have told Nick *that*.

Volcano man is gone from the TV screen, now there's a photographer from National Geographic talking about a trip to Ngorongoro – technically, it's a volcanic crater, although these days it's full of wildlife. Zebras and elephant, lions and giraffe. It's in Tanzania, so there must be migrating herds of wildebeest. How do they get in and out of the crater? I wish the interviewer would ask.

Everyone has a National Geographic picture. Elizabeth Bishop wrote a poem about hers. In it she described a volcano, and much more. Six years old, in a waiting room, she paged inside yellow margins to find out what the world was. And that she really wasn't what she'd thought *she* was, before she'd discovered those natives with bare breasts and pointed heads.

My father gave me a National Geographic subscription for my seventh birthday. It was delivered to Pittsburgh, then Baltimore, then New York.

And so the places where I wasn't, and he wasn't, became our crossing points – points where each one was for the other. *Even though we're not together*, he wrote on the birthday card, *we can share the whole world*.

He asked me to write to him, whenever a new issue arrived, and tell him about my favourite picture in the journal. I wrote him about the Afghan girl with the blazing green eyes who seemed more holy than the Virgin Mary, about impossible tigers that looked like fire, about white baby seals (how can it be that there are people in the world who



would club a baby seal to death?). Later, when I read *In the Waiting Room*, I understood how Bishop felt, finding herself in other places, with people in pith helmets and riding breeches.

I've got the *Complete Poems* here, but I don't feel like reading now. I think I'm picking up on a collective restiveness. Contagious emotions running through the transit lounge like a Mexican wave. First there was disbelief and denial. That was followed by agitation, then resignation, then a building frustration, some random bursts of anger, then a kind of dumb acceptance. Now it is cycling around again. Perhaps our emotions are synching, like the menses of adolescent girls in dormitories.

Grunge boy is jiggling his foot over the edge of the seat. Rastaman is fiddling with his volume dial. Asian girl is snapping through the pages of a magazine with a kind of violence. Her soft pink velour shell suit is covered all over in tiny hash tags. Twitterati couture. Business Joe is punching obsessively into his Blackberry, the line between his eyes and the straight stripe of his mouth make a kind of inverted 'T' that's freaking me out a little bit. I really need to move.

I calculate the risk of leaving my space. I'm already possessive of the small familiarities of chair and windowpane, pillar and light. What to leave behind as a marker? I don't want to lose any of my small comforts. Don't want to stretch my bubble of solitude to include anyone else, either. But I'll have to.

In the end I leave behind my fleece and *Dona Flor*, one on each seat. Rastaman is gracious. *Tranquilo*, he says in a soft Brazilian accent. I will save them. Turns out we're on the same flight. If there ever is a flight. If we don't end up marooned here forever. Maybe we're actually caught in some cruel reality TV hoax. *Terminal Survivor*. All the hanging screens could have two-way purpose, spewing false information intended to foment panic and disorder, while at the same time recording and broadcasting the reactions of the unwitting players. In these games, people go tribal fast. The key to survival is to be brutally self-serving, while simultaneously forming strategic groupings. In which case I've already made my first, tentative alliance.

Even so, I take Elizabeth with me when I head off to find tea and connectivity. There are islands of relative serenity clustered around the useless boarding gates, but the food hall is a droning hive.

I'm lucky – there's a table coming free at the first hotspot café I find. I grab a serviette and wipe the table before I put my Bishop book down. Its cover is scuffed, the end papers grimed, but it's become something of a talisman over the years. There are dog-ears marking my favourites – 'One Art' supreme among them – and pages smudged, probably with chocolate. *As if a river should carry all/ the scenes that it had once reflected/shut in its waters, and not floating/on momentary surfaces.* I read that when I was sixteen, returning from the Amazon. Bishop had loved that river, too.

There was a Bishop poem, or a line of one, for every seminal point in my life, and I find the perfect one to share with Em right now. I slip a sugar sachet between the pages to hold the place. My tea, in a cardboard cup, is too hot to drink. I stab the tea bag up and down with blunt plastic needle that serves for a spoon and watch the televised eruption. There really is no escaping it. All the people stranded, all over the world, at all the frozen airports, are watching themselves on-screen. This airport wasn't as bad as some, apparently. Even now that all the flights that were mid-air when the ban was put in place have arrived. There'll be no more leaving or landing until the airspace is declared safe for travel again. Not that it really matters what time or day I arrive in Salvador.

A wide-eyed, blonde announcer is trying her best to make it all sound terribly exciting. But it's not. It just a long dull pause in business as usual. A pause in which people are confronted by the thoughts that crowd the space left by the collapse of their plans. For those unpractised at contemplation, that can be a frightening thing.

*Dear Em -*

*Remember the one about the night view from the plane? 'Over those fires/no one could walk:/those flaring acids/and variegated bloods'? I was thinking of that, flying over city lights last night. That was before we knew about the volcano. Now I've realised EB was quite fascinated by them. Besides those lines (from 'Night City'), and the rivulets of fire in 'The Waiting Room', there's 'Crusoe in England' – 'a new volcano has erupted'. Well so it has, and here I am, grounded, like thousands of other people, in limboland, and everyone volcano obsessed. Imagine the poetry EB would have made from all this!*

Would Elizabeth have been at all interested in the gossiping TV screens? Would she have shrunk inside herself, painfully shy and unable to escape from all these people? Would she have put her hands over her ears and let out a silent scream?

*You may have seen it, if you turned on your TV, which I bet you haven't. Good for you. Don't bother. It's all nonsense and hysteria and not so much an emergency as inconvenient. Unless you own an airline, I suppose. Or an airport. Or live under a molten mountain. Selfish me, I am none of these. I'm just delayed and waylaid and I thought I would tell you about it because I saw a thing on TV about how Munch's *Scream* was inspired by the intense sunsets in the wake of Krakatoa. Skies tinted by ash, even a hemisphere away. I should worry about that – the climactic effects, post eruption. But these things are always so much more complex, from the self-regulating Gaia point of view (which is one that makes sense to me) than via straight linear reductionism. So I'll wait for the scientists to stop arguing about whether it will make us hotter or cooler, then I'll form my own opinion. Not that it will make any difference to the final outcome.*

My tea has gone tepid. I down it in one gulp. When the queue gets shorter I'll get some more.

*I'm on the way to Salvador, btw. The one in Brazil. It's far from Manaus, and I haven't decided yet whether or not to visit Bill. SO DO NOT TELL HIM THAT I AM COMING please. I have some work to do over the next month, and if there is time at the end I might take a trip up. Not sure if he is even there, at the moment. When I get there I'll write you again. Or if we are here for much longer I might be forced to give you a progress report. They haven't run out of tea yet, so we're alright for now.*

They have run out of some things, though. Pastries and sandwiches, pre-packed snacks. There's more coming in soon, the cafeteria staff say. They're all bleary-eyed from staying on all night to meet the demands of the stranded.

Elizabeth Bishop's *Complete Poems* has a peach-coloured cover, cracked with white where it has been folded open, again and again. There is a picture of a palm tree and windmills, a watercolour Elizabeth did in Mexico in 1942. There is something written there, tiny in the bottom right hand corner of the painting, but I've never been able to read it; Em's cat Marmaduke bit through the words while the book lay, irresistibly deliciously, in a pile of birthday wrapping paper.

*Give the Duke a tummy tickle for me, and tell him to go bite a bicycle.*

I flip through the book out of habit. On another dog-eared page, a cathedral is struck by lightening. In Santarém. *One tower had/ a widening zigzag crack/ all the way down./ It was a miracle./ The priest's house right next door / had been struck, too, and his brass bed/ (the only one in town) galvanised black./ Graças a deus, he'd been in Belém.*

If Bishop was still alive, I could tell her what it's like to be struck by lightening. Perhaps the poet would help me find the right words to hold together my own widening zigzag crack.

The day my mother died, we were not in Belem, *sem graça*, but on a mountain in Africa, where dragons roared.

Elizabeth was also orphaned, raised by aunts and grandparents. She also loved travel and plants – particularly Brazilian ones. She'd spent 15 years there. Aunt Em, with her love for words and ideas and sentiments that could not easily be put into words, had understood our shared sensibility. Em, who made a living hacking back other people's overblown prose, and wrote her own poetry into slim black moleskein notebooks, in fountain pen with rust red ink that looked like dried blood on the page.

Strange that she could never find the right words to tell the whole truth about my mother. Words, for once, had failed her. But children pick up things. They don't need to know the details. They *feel* the truth.

With all the poetry in the world, Em could not protect me from that.

## Cape Town

### 4

All their major moments happened in the mountains.

Maddy remembers how the thought coalesced in her mind as she hiked up the slope towards the white beacon that marked the top of Constantiaberg.

Not for nothing did they call this the Cape of Storms. The unseasonable late winter heat had peaked by the time she had finally made it onto the mountain, giving way to the foreshadowing cool of a storm. Not the usual winter rain, that blew in from the north on a cold front, or the high, dry, maddeningly relentless south-easter gales of summer. This was a rarer thing, a mid season anomaly, a massive, moody thunderstorm. Great.

The built-in lightening sensors that lived somewhere in the back of her head sent alert signals down her spine and all the way into her fingertips. But the storm was a way off yet. When she got a bit higher she would be able to see the clouds banked up on the horizon, drawing in energy over the Atlantic. Already the sunlight had an eerie intensity against the gathering grey. It suited her mood. For reasons she couldn't define she knew that the trip to Brazil would ring the death knell on the relationship. They were finito, her and Nick. Kaput.

Her thoughts took on the rhythm of her steps, as she trudged up the white sand trail, the city falling away below and behind her. Walking always cleared her mind. She had hoped it would help her deal with the evening ahead.

She wasn't looking forward to Sherman's party. She was dreading the public pretence that she and Nick were fine about what was happening to them. That it was just the natural course of things.

Of course it *was* the natural course of things. People have cycles, relationships have cycles, life is a series of cycles, wheels within wheels. But it was only now that it was finally ending that she could admit how much she had wished for another outcome. Wished that they could turn the mutual vulnerabilities that had brought them together into something less fragile.

Ahead of her, Vavi burst out of a bank of proteas, a brown and white blur as he crossed the path and dived into the bushes on the other side. Probably on the scent of a *dassie*, or a porcupine. She should call him to heel – he was obedient, in the way of sheepdogs. And energetic. He hadn't been out on a proper walk in a while. She let him run.

The russet patches in his shaggy coat blended perfectly with the fynbos. He was a hybrid of his black-and-white mother and an anonymous donor, a 'pavement special' who had given him his colouring and his cocked up ears. She loved the happy accident of his genes, his joy attacks, his utter dependability. He was named for Nikolai Ivanovich Vavilov, the Russian plant geneticist, biodiversity pioneer and champion of hybridity. Vavi for short. When she first introduced the dog to Nick, he thought he was named after the leader of the Congress of South African Trade Unions. He bought him a red collar, and joked about his communist roots.

She told him the original Vavilov might not have appreciated the joke. After travelling the globe collecting seeds for his seed bank in Leningrad, dedicating his life to promoting food security through his research on crop diversity and hybridity, Vavilov starved to death in one of Stalin's prisons.

Now there was an institute and a statue in St Petersburg, a coin minted with his face on it, a crater named after him on the dark side of the moon, a glacier that honoured him in the high Pamirs between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. And a patchy, piebald dog trailing his name through the wild flowers on Africa's southernmost peninsula. Watching Vavi here, sun lighting up his coat and the rust red restios, she believed he was perfectly suited for this landscape.

The winter rains had tinged everything low-lying with a fresh new green. It was always such a relief when the fire season was over. During the hot dry summer she and her colleagues held their collective breath, waiting for the inevitable blazes that would rage through the these precious pockets of biodiversity.

Fynbos needs fire to regenerate. Before the city crept up around the base of the peninsula's mountains, marooning them like heather islands in a glinting asphalt sea, those fires had natural causes. These days, too many of the fires that swept the dry peninsula each summer were set by bored, pyromaniac youths. Or by mindless tourists

tossing half-spent cigarettes out of rental-car windows. These days, there were too many fires for the fynbos to recuperate before the next blaze; too many for the seeds to recover and regenerate, germinate, grow, mature and reseed. Burned too young, they edged ever closer to extinction.

Like her, she thought, in a wave of self-pity as another hot iron cramped in her belly. She has always been fascinated with the thought that every woman is born with all of her seeds in place. Even in her infant womb, all possible future children wait. Every month, from maturity, one of those future chances, maybe two, will unfurl, reach out and expire. The body signals its biological disappointment with sharp pains and raging moods that flare like runaway fires. Maddy was well into her 30s, well aware that each cycle brought her closer to her last. This had been her determined choice. What kind of mother could a motherless child possibly make? That's what she told herself, anyway, against Nick's romantic notions of hearth, home and family. If you need to love and nurture something, she told him, you get a dog.

Vavi's ecstatic bush thrashes released a honeyed fynbos scent. Running ahead and racing back to her, full of the exuberance of space and smells. Maddy breathed in and felt herself expand in the way that only happened to her alone, far from crowds and under skies that suggested the infinite. If ever she had a religion, this was it.

There was a sublime subtlety to fynbos. You could look at it from afar, and see nothing but featureless scrub; get in close and be astounded by the sheer variety, the tiny details. She loved the balanced symbiosis in this botany of contrast. She didn't feel so alien, herself, when she was among these plants.

She was high up now on the sliver of peninsula that divided the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans. She could see one or both oceans, alternately or together in snatches, from the highest points. While the back of her brain was on lightning alert, her eyes took in the minutiae of the plants in her peripheral vision. Masses of tiny pink Erica balls hazed the grey-green brush. The fine white sand of the pathway was tinged purple in the fading light. She rounded a speckled sandstone koppie and stopped in wonder at the valley that opened up in front of her.

Leucadendrons carpeted the bowl, their lime-yellow bracts shining as if they had absorbed all the sun of the day, their cones lit up like candles. Soon spring would be

bursting into full glory, and when the summer arrived she would have her work cut out for her, collecting the seeds that matured as the flowers waned. Except that she was going to Brazil. She was going to miss the most important time, the season her year revolved around.

She had met Nick in spring, in a high valley not unlike this one, in the Kogelberg reserve. At the time she was part of a team of young botanists in Search and Rescue, saving endangered plants in reserves and urban lots around the city. She was leading a group of city folk on a nature appreciation hike.

Nick was a rising ad agency star, a copywriter who had won a few awards and was looking for a social responsibility campaign to raise his profile. He thought fynbos awareness might be it.

At first she thought he was just like the others – if less obviously so than his art director, Marilese. She was dressed all in black, with stylish horn-rimmed glasses and slim pumps that kept filling with sand so that she had to stop repeatedly. Maddy's memory of Marilese that day was of her balancing like an awkward bird on one leg, swiping her shoes clean with a finger and muttering about how she would rather be sipping a skinny latte. Who knew that she would become the one person Maddy could always turn to for tea (or a seriously stiff whiskey) and sympathy?

Nick's hiking boots, at least, showed real wear and tear. His t-shirt had some clever, ironic logo spoof she can't remember now. What she remembers is how he kept up with her, while the others lagged behind, their chatter trailing off as they puffed up the steep slope. She remembers his intelligent questions, how his eyes began to shine as the landscape did its work, forcing them all to leave their petty concerns behind.

At the crest of a rise the party stopped for a water and view break, clambering up some monolithic boulders speckled with orange and green lichen. She found Nick in the shade below, crouched next to a *polygala myrtifolia*, its flower's pink and purple petals open like wings. 'It's called a butterfly bush,' she started to tell him, but he shushed her, and pointed to a green leaf that morphed into a praying mantis.

She was about to call the others but he silenced her again with a finger to his lips. What he had found was not one praying mantis, but two. The female was fat, bulbous, her bulging sides stencilled with a racing stripe of dark spots along their long contour. The



male, much smaller, perched on top of her, green stick hands clenched around her neck in concentration. They watched silently for a while. And then the male pulsed and flushed orange, his passion blazing his abdomen, and Nick looked at her and she noticed how his dark blond fringe fell straight and heavy over one eye. He was not her type. She had always preferred dark haired men. Like her dad, cliché that it was. Even so, she had to stop herself reaching out to move the hair away from Nick's face so that she could see more of him.

They called it their 'mantis moment', and made it their mission, in the early days, to recreate it wherever possible. They made love on mountaintops with only the flowers and the disinterested wildlife as witness. They camped beneath rocky outcrops decorated with ancient bushman paintings, hiked up to waterfalls and slid together under icy mountain curtains. They wandered along tea-coloured rivers and slept on slim sand islands exposed to the stars. On the river they ducked dragonflies while they painted each other with zinc sunblock in crazy colours – ultra violet and lime green – from small plastic jars. He took particular care around her nipples.

Their first Christmas, he gave her a copy of Laurens van der Post's *A Mantis Carol*, Jungian-inspired reflections on the sacred role of the praying mantis in ancient bushman lore. On the inside front cover he had sketched the mating mantises, just as they saw them. She was so touched by the cool sentimentality of the gesture, she had almost forgotten the cynicism of his parting shot that first day, as he stood up and let the blood ease the stiffness from his thighs. 'Enjoy yourself, sucker,' he said quietly to the mantis male. 'You're about to become lunch.'

## Cape Town

### 5

Beginning, middle and end. The way she remembers it, they all happened in the mountains.

Once they got caught in a storm in the Cederberg. That winter was a particularly wet one. Friends said they were crazy to hike that weekend, but they went anyway. Nick had been insistent.

They slept in a cave their first night, watched over by the ghosts of long ago people who had marked themselves, in elongated ochre, on the walls. When the fire had burned down to a few glowing coals he pulled out a ring, joked about question popping, and offered a possible future. She weighed the ring in the palm of her hand. Instead of a gemstone it had at its centre a convex pool of pyrite, a bevel of coppery gold speckled with black, like the dense clouds of the Milky Way, obscured that night.

In her panic she lurched at something to say. 'This is fool's gold.'

She realised her mistake immediately, as the hurt pooled and hardened in his face, but it was too late.

He slept turned away from her, cocooned in his sleeping bag. The next morning, as the rain clouds gathered, she put the ring in a pocket of her backpack. For safekeeping, she said. For later, she meant.

There was no lightning in the storm they got caught in on their way down the mountain, just wild winds with icy spears of sideways-slicing rain. They couldn't find an overhang to shelter under, so they slid down the slopes, soaked-through and shivering, to a little hut they'd spotted from on high.

It belonged to an old woman, a goatherd whose flock huddled, slit-eyed, under the eaves of a corrugated iron long-drop shed in the back yard.

The goats had bulbs of garlic tied with knotted twine around their necks. So did the crone. There was garlic everywhere – under the eaves, over the doorway and all the windows. Maddy wanted to quiz the old woman her about the healing properties of indigenous herbs. She asked her what other plants she used, expecting '*Agtdaegeneesbos*' for skin ulcers, or '*Kouebos*' for coughs and colds.

Instead the old lady set the speckled red enamel coffeepot over her single ring flame, walked over to a wood cabinet mounted high in the wall, and pulled out a giant-sized jar of Vicks VapoRub. ‘*Maak alles reg,*’ she said, in a rolling Afrikaans *brei*. Fixes everything. As if to prove the point, she sat down, hoicked up her skirts and began rubbing the pungent gel into the shining skin of her mottled and skinny legs. When she poured them coffee, it carried with it the greasy whiff of eucalyptus.

Before they left, Maddy took a walk out back to see where the old lady grew her garlic. She hoped to find some other herbs growing there. Instead she found strange glittering fruit hanging from the tangle of rain-soaked trees on the far bank of a crooked stream. They were CD’s, twirling and sparkling in the emerging sun, like Christmas decorations. ‘Chases away baboons,’ the old lady explained, and pointed out a few gnarled and fruitless apricot trees on the near side of the riverbank.

Driving out of the mountains on the twisting dirt road they came across a young girl running after a goat. The goat was coming straight at the car, veering off at the very last minute so Nick had to slam on brakes. The goat slowed as they passed, which gave the girl a chance to stop, hop-skipping on one foot to adjust the plastic shoe on her other. For one long moment they were all paused, connected: the girl, the goat, the two of them. Then the goat leapt sideways up out of the roadside ditch and the girl began running again, waving and laughing as she continued her futile chase.

‘She doesn’t seem to mind that there’s no point in it,’ Nick said. It might have been the first thing he’d said all day.

‘Maybe she just enjoys the chase.’

‘Maybe,’ Nick said. And then, it seemed, there really was nothing left to talk about.

They stopped at the Clanwilliam Cash-n-Carry and bought a jar of Vicks. In the car Maddy twisted the turquoise lid off the blue plastic jar and scooped out a great spicy blob of it. Menthol 2.8mg, Camphor 52.6mg, Eucalyptus 13.3mg. She put her feet up on the dashboard and rubbed it into the scratches on her own legs just to feel the heat and burn. She rubbed some on the faint latticework of scars on both her knees, even though the cuts had closed up long ago. Skull and horse head – only she knew what the uneven

shapes were supposed to be. She rested her chin between them, breathed in comfort and loss until they got home.

University of Cape Town

## Cape Town

### 6

There were moments with Nick that she had felt herself complete. And others when she had felt completely bereft. And the effort of navigating between the two states had begun to wear her down.

But they *were* always good in nature. Perhaps that was why Nick chose to confess to her on a mountaintop, thinking that there would be enough space up there to dilute the hurt of a betrayal. There wasn't.

'Did you use a condom at least?' she asked him at the top of a peak called Judas, where a cave blinked blank eyed over the Atlantic, glittering and indifferent. His eyes shifted. 'Jesus Nick, in this day and age!'

She remembers that the sun was beating down, and she had left him there to find his own way to the empty car park. To walk the long road home. Without water, or forgiveness.

The sun was less relentless today, winter angled and cloud muted, so that a strange glow illuminated everything light against the gathering shadows. A low clump of everlastings shone out starkly white. She bent down to pluck a few flowers, to add to the bunch she kept threaded into her car's dashboard grill. The petal whorls were silvery-white, paper-thin. They'd last for months, before flying off in the first blast of summer air-conditioning. A reminder that nothing actually lasts forever, no matter what you call it.

The heat was still thick and humid, although the beginnings of a breeze signalled the impending storm. Vavi was barking, urgent, some way ahead. She cocked her head to listen. No voices, no puff and jangle of approaching cyclist. The dog must have found something interesting and wild. Maddy quickened her pace to catch up to him before he did any damage.

It had taken her a while to collect enough coffin nails and last straws. There is nothing quite as satisfying as having your strongest fears proved justified. Perhaps she enjoyed the sensation a little too much. More of a masochist than she liked to admit.

She weathered the first infidelity. But she pulled away from Nick after the second. She didn't know how many there had been since then. It was irrelevant now anyway.

They'd called a kind of truce. When Marilese's tenants ran out on their lease she offered Maddy her Hout Bay cottage. The timing was perfect. Maddy was just starting to feel settled there now, cocooned in the forest, with one huge window framing the greenery of Orange Kloof and only a short winding drive over Constantia Nek to the Institute.

She could be alone there. She had a fantasy about digging a moat, filling it with water siphoned from the Disa River, adding crocodiles. The miniature, nocturnal variety, from Central Africa. With their pupils dilated to help them see in the dark, their eyes seemed soft and mammalian. It distracted you from their deadly jaws.

Marilese was unimpressed. 'You only pretend to want to be inaccessible,' she told her. Marilese lived in a rambling Cape Dutch homestead half way between Maddy's cottage and the institute. Husband, two kids and a home office. These days she did freelance work, but not so much of it with Nick, anymore. 'I take it you won't be giving Nick a key?'

Maddy still had a key to his house, a glass eyrie high up on the other side of the mountain overlooking the Atlantic. If she wanted to take the coast road home from town she could stop in there. If he was there they'd make dinner, throwing together a quick pasta with practiced efficiency. Avoiding certain topics, slipping into familiar roles. She never stayed the night.

If he was out, she'd feel like an alien in the transparent cube. It was a relief, finding herself a stranger there. She was free of the strain of looking for traces of other women – in the refrigerator, the laundry basket, the bathroom bin, in the scribbles on the telephone notepad. She'd hated the straw-clutching person she had become, towards the end. She'd felt trapped there, a startled bug in amber.

She was much happier now. Self-sufficient, on her own. Not caring too much. Not caring very much at all.

Glasshouses were for people with nothing to hide. Or people for whom the mere pretence of having nothing to hide was itself a kind of camouflage. Hiding in plain sight, wasn't that what they called it?

Nick hired a decorator just after they moved in together. Maddy was on a field trip and came home to find an over-perfumed, busty woman called 'Soozi' (that's how

she spelled it) sitting on her worn-out sofa surrounded by fabric samples. Soozi had no sense of personal space and an affectation for kissing her male clients on both cheeks, Latin style. Maddy pretended not to notice how Nick's eyes lingered on the woman's cleavage while they discussed the virtues of uplighting. But she felt increasingly sidelined from the sofa searches and the Saturday morning outings to designer emporiums.

She remembers researching the medicinal properties of *Thunbergia alata*, the flowering vine her grandmother called Black-Eyed-Susan, one Saturday morning when Soozi picked Nick up in her Mazda MX-5 convertible-built-for-two and took him out to test sofas. As the afternoon progressed into the evening, and still he didn't come back, she thought about the diseases – venereal, principally – that the vine's East African relative was good for. She pictured designer Soozi all tangled up in it, pulled down and smothered with only one vulgar high-heeled mule thrust out of the innocent greenery.

'You're turning into a metrosexual,' she accused him one morning over spilled coffee, which he rushed to mop up with uncharacteristic haste, to stop it seeping into the new counter grouting. He laughed. A little too heartily, she thought.

Even on his inflating salary, he struggled to afford the house, while she struggled to hoist shopping bags up the concrete steps cut into the cliff for someone with a much longer stride than hers. The less she wanted to be in the relationship, the more effort she put into the trappings. Fresh flowers (grown in a hot house, not on the mountain) and elaborate meals that offended her sense of frugality. They didn't lessen the guilt of her changed feelings. Didn't stop her hating herself for being sucked into the cycle of self-flagellation.

When they first met, Nick drove an old gold Mercedes Benz from the seventies and lived in an art deco flat in Sea Point with parquet flooring and frog plumbing that gave out great adenoidal gulps after every flush. They would lie in bed and giggle, sweaty and spent, and make up names for the toilet. Todd was the one that stuck, although for a while they toyed with others – Randy, Jethro, Duke. Why they decided the toilet was a closet cowboy she couldn't recall.

Now Nick obsessed about the paintwork of his financed-to-the-gills Audi A4. She preferred the honesty of her jeep. Plus it was dog friendly. Unlike the new sofas. She took to dropping Vavi off with Marilese before she went away on field trips, so the dog

could relax in the shabby-chic expanse of a pet-and-child-centred home. Nick didn't seem to miss him.

Vavi's barking was becoming more frantic now. As soon as she found him they would head back down the mountain. She wanted to stop in on Marilese on the way home.

The barks had turned into manic yelps, and Maddy began to jog. She rounded a bend in the path and stopped so suddenly that she felt her feet sink into the sand beneath her.

A Cape cobra swayed in front of Vavi, hood unfurled on top of a metre of sleek brown body, with still more spring-coiled and ready on the ground. In the long seconds it took Maddy to assess the scene, she took in the eyes like two black beads, the cool lemon yellow throat, the flickering tongue, the flanges fanning out on each side of the head from a column of pure muscle. The snake was total concentration. It followed Vavi's movement with eyes and body as the dog darted from side to side, letting out a yelp every time he came to the end of his run and changed direction. He had already churned a groove in the sand. Had he hypnotised the snake, or had the snake charmed him? Maddy opened her mouth to shout but nothing came out. She took a step forward; Vavi's eye darted towards her; the snake struck.

Whether Maddy's movement distracted the snake, whether it was a mock bite, or whether the dog's instinctive reflexes managed to evade the bite's arc, they would never know. Maddy shouted and threw clumps of ineffectual sand after the cobra as it slid off into the undergrowth. Then she grabbed Vavi by the collar and sank to her knees, checking his eyes for signs of cobra spit before she buried her face in his soft brown ruff and burst into tears.

It was only after she had Vavi safe in the car, and was waiting to pull out into rush hour traffic, that she saw the spray of old Everlastings in the air vent, and realised that she had dropped the fresh ones she picked that day.



## In Transit

[4]

The sound of thunder wakes me.

My skin itches. My mouth is dry. My limbs ache, and I'm numb where my hip has been pressing into the space between two chairs. I've a memory of fire, of hot rivulets and ash.

I'm floating, hot, in a river of red and orange. It takes a while to register the bright light glare in the high ceilings, the newly familiar faces bobbing in a flow of orange scoop chairs.

To sit up I have to push off a red blanket – where did that come from? It's thin and scratchy, striped with yellow. Standard airline issue. Everyone else in our section of the transit lounge has one. Rastaman's is still neatly folded, encased in plastic wrap. I hate the way they do that – the unnecessary plastic for the sake of suggesting hygiene. Who knows where these blankets have been? And if they *had* actually been cleaned, what kind of toxic chemicals were sprayed on them in the process, trapped inside that plastic wrap, to escape in a rush when you ripped it open and hit you in the face with a blast of naphthalene, or similar?

Another low rumble growls from somewhere beneath the building. It makes me nervous. Even though I know the volcano is thousands of miles away, in another country.

Rastaman is watching me. He's lying on his side, using his blanket as a pillow. His smile is one of a man fully aware of his considerable charms. 'You were asleep when they came with those. But I think you were cold.' He is holding a book – *my* book, the *Dona Flor*. 'I hope you don't mind?' His thumb is keeping his place, well into the story already. He's either a fast reader or I've been asleep a long time. 'I never read it in English. It is strange.'

So we've been lying facing one another across a section of purple carpet flecked with orange triangles while he reads Amado's story of love, lust and magic in last century's Salvador. The strange intimacy of strangers.

I feel more than a little invaded, but I force myself to smile. I chose him as an ally, after all. He still has his earphones in. 'What you listening to?' I'm actually a little curious, since I haven't yet pinned him down to a tune.

'Kaya N'Gan Daya,' he sits up in one fluid move. 'Gilberto Gil doing Bob Marley.' He pulls the phones out of his ear and offers me his iPod. But I shake my head no. I don't want his music in my head.

'He came to Cape Town once, Gilberto Gil,' I tell him. 'It was when he was minister of culture. Under Lula, I think.'

'He makes us proud.' His mouth rounds the words so that his English is lilted into something soft and sweet. He pulls a card out of a side pocket of his backpack. *Roberto Alvarez da Costa Silva*. I'd forgotten the pleasure of elongated Brazilian names, the way they build on themselves and contain their own bouncing rhythms and attenuated family trees. Beneath his name is a picture of a drum and the name of a store – *Os Agogos*. On the back, in red, yellow and green: *OLODUM – casa de samba-reggae*. An address in Pelourinho, Salvador.

'Prazer.' I introduce myself, speaking my first stutters of Portuguese in too long. I can feel myself becoming more languid as my mouth stretches around the long vowels. 'That's where I'm headed – Salvador. I'm actually going to be staying in Pelourinho.'

'You should come visit us.' He motions for me to keep the card. 'I'm on my way to a conference in Rio, but I'll be back next week.'

'If we're not still stuck here.'

He shakes his head. 'We won't be.' How can he be so sure? He has drumsticks stuck into the netting of his backpack, tied and tassled in fluorescent green and orange. 'We play Sundays and Tuesdays,' he says, standing up. 'You should come'

I find myself assenting, looking up at him. He is tall, and the red, black and white beads around his wrists remind me of the ones my sangoma friends wear, signs of faith and practice underneath their urbanised exteriors of nylon and crease-free cotton. I

promise to watch his things, and watch him as he walks off with long, floating strides into the vastness of the concourse.

A bossa nova tune starts deep inside my brain. Not a Jobim original, but a parody of it – the cool irony of Beck’s ‘Tropicalia’.

*When they beat  
On a broken guitar  
and all the streets  
they reek of tropical charms*

I can’t remember all the words, but the riff has hooked me, is looping through me with the manic *cuíca* whoops, the Brazilian laughing gourd that always makes me think of a deranged toucan hiccupping in the middle of a song.

I’ve been shut down way too long.

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An hour later, Roberto is still not back, and I’m still tethered to this lookout post. Outside, lighting flashes keep illuminating the hulks of parked aircraft. What are the chances of being caught in limbo between a volcanic eruption and a lightning storm?

I wish they would turn the lights off. Incessant fluorescence has got to be bad for your body clock. Plus I want to keep an eye on what’s coming, and the light is hazing the windowpane.

The sky outside is throwing up puce and green but it’s not yet light enough to compete with the reflection from inside. *Can you look out the window, without your shadow getting in the way?* The bossa nova retreated along with Roberto, but bits of song are coming at me unbidden now, all of them sappy, self-indulgent. *When you have no one*, Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy moans, practical in his self-pity, *no one can hurt you...* Maybe I should have accepted Roberto’s iPod after all.

Memories run through all of us, constantly changeable. We revisit and edit them to suit whatever fantasy of self we need to nurture at the time. If I’m going to rewrite my recent history, I need a new soundtrack.

The low rumble travels under the floor again, louder now. Now I can taste sulphur. The hairs on the back of my neck are beginning to rise. Might as well face it. I go to the window to look for what I know is coming.

When I press my hands against the glass I can feel my palms tingle, feel the current in my body rise to meet the flashes outside. Come and get me already. Please.

Sometimes memories ride in on physical sensations. Sometimes they ride in on smells. Airports smell of anonymity, metal and dust. But there's something else here now, animal, vegetable or chemical, that takes me back. Christmas on my mother's family farm was so different from the snow-scented East coast Christmases with my father's relatives in New Jersey or Pittsburgh or Baltimore. The houses covered in tiny lights and fake reindeer thigh-deep in snow drifts in front gardens. African Christmas was hot; not the heavy, dripping heat of our Amazon home, but a dry heat that built through the day and climaxed in dramatic thunderstorms, bringing relief and a cool that would last through the evening and into the night until the cycle began again the next morning.

My grandparents farmed cattle in the Natal midlands. Their Dargle spread lay at the foot of the Drakensberg range –ragged, beautiful, unpredictable. That week, between Christmas and New Year, my mother took my father and me on a hike to Cathedral Peak. I was finally old enough to hike on my own.

The day started out clear, but the soft breeze had exhausted itself by noon, leaving us gasping for air that got more sticky the higher we climbed. Sarah carried a picnic in her backpack and I remember hard-boiled eggs and red-and-white checked napkins, warm fizzy Appletiser and cheese sandwiches that tasted of the farm.

The eggs had blue-green rims around their yellow yolks. I didn't want to eat them. My mother told me blue was a lucky colour, nothing to be afraid of. But those eggs tasted dry and strange.

We were on our way down the mountain when the air changed. The clouds that had been building on the horizon– big and bulbous and purple – seemed to draw in daylight, gobbling it up and growing. And then beginning to growl.

'Dragons are waking up,' Bill said, trying to keep his voice light. I saw both my parents stop, stiffen, and have an entire conversation without exchanging a word.

‘Let’s hurry up then.’ My mother turned her back on the gathering clouds and took me firmly by the hand. ‘Right, Maddy?’

That voice meant business. It meant: no more dawdling, I’m only-going-to-tell-you-this-one-time. But I was already tired. I’d walked all the way up by myself.

‘My legs are jelly,’ I whined. And before Sarah could protest, Bill had scooped me up onto his shoulders and started striding down the path.

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea,’ Sarah came panting up beside us, pulling his sleeve. She was the one who knew these mountains, had grown up exploring them. The purple clouds were almost on top of us now. Although we were still bathed in sunlight, the grumblings were turning into shouts, and when I looked back across the deep valley behind us I could see lightning bolts being thrown from one peak to another. Without a word Bill swung me down and they each held one of my hands, making a game of swing-pulling me between them as we ran.

Just before the sun was snuffed out entirely we came to a rocky outcrop with a large overhang.

‘Maybe we should shelter here.’ Bill was panting.

Down below, in miniature, I could see the lodge, and the parking lot behind it where the roof of our car glinted along with the others parked there.

‘I think we should push on.’ Slick strands of Sarah’s long hair were stuck to the sides of her face where the sweat made little rivers. Some had found their way into her mouth and she pulled them out, impatiently. We began to move forward again.

As we rounded the outcrop I saw a cluster of dry, paper-thin flowers sheltering in the lee of the rocks. Everlastings. I loved the name – had loved the flowers even more after my mother told me they were also called ‘*sewejaartjies*’ – ‘seven-little-years’, which is what I would be soon. It was my first inkling that something could represent infinity, and yet be trapped in a predetermined, finite time.

‘Look mama!’ I slipped out of my mother’s safe hand and began to pull at the flowers, taking hold of the stems low down as I had been told, so there was something to tie them together with.

The first loud crack sounded like a tear in the sky, and the keen of wind that hit us rushed out from that gash.

‘Come on Maddy!’

My own name was the last thing I heard my mother say. The next crack was so loud that it seemed to come from inside us. The earth opened under us and I was flung forward. My father’s cry unravelled inchoate behind me.

Then the ringing in my ears made everything else go quiet. I could feel rain hard on my skin but I couldn’t hear it. I could see my father, as if through a dim tunnel, sitting, legs splayed in front of him as if he had just slipped and fallen on his bum. He was shaking his head, dazed. He looked silly! Just like that guy in the cartoon.

The air smelled wrong and there was a taste in my mouth I would learn to call sulphur. I couldn’t see my mother and when I tried to sit up, I couldn’t seem to move. I could only blink, and blink, until my father scooped me up with a sob which I felt in his chest but still could not hear and I saw my mother’s body, rigid on the ground, emitting a strange blue light, ringed like the yolks of the eggs we had eaten not even an hour before. The life left in my mother was otherworldly. The life that had been her, earthly, earthed, was gone, as if the circle of singed grass around her had been burned by her life force, leaving.

*In the corners there is light, that is good for you. And behind you, I have warned you, there are awful things....*

I see his silhouette reflected before I feel his touch on my elbow. ‘You okay?’ The voice is low, gentle. I realise that my eyes are streaming, my face is as wet as the other side of the glass. ‘We won’t be much longer here, I think,’ Rasta Roberto says.

I don’t answer. In real time, this moment would be uncomfortably long. But transit time is different. It seems to have distorted the continuum, so the usual conventions of social discourse – the correct number of beats between a question and an answer, the thoughtful pause not long enough to suggest lack of interest – these become meaningless.

Even so, a silence left too long speaks volumes.

I have nothing to say to this person, while lightning flickers over the dead runway. In our reflection he is much taller than me. I’m tiny anyway, but the difference is even more absurd because of the elongated knit cap he wears pulled over his dreadlocks. Broad

shoulders. Feet spread wide in the way of tall people, arms crossed protectively in front.  
The forgotten verse of *Tropicalia* comes to me in a rush.

*You're out of luck*

*You're singing funeral songs*

*To the studs*

*They're anabolic and bronze*

*They seem to strut*

*In their millennial fogs*

*Till they fall down and deflate...*

Beck mocking me again. Or I'm mocking myself. What am I doing, standing here  
tear-stained, riffing songs of lust and bossa nova? I'm way too jaded for the Brazilian-  
sex-god-holiday-cure-all fantasy.

But what Roberto is offering is much worse. When I turn around he is still  
looking at me. There is no expectation in his eyes. No judgement, no false sympathy.  
Merely kindness. It makes me want to scream.

I leave him standing there, and head off to find a cup of tea, alone.

## Cape Town

7

Maddy remembers being rattled and exhilarated by the snake encounter, and wanting to share the story. There was just enough time for a cup of tea with Marilese before she had to head home to shower and change for the party.

In all her years trudging this mountain, she had almost trodden on fat, lazy puffadders more times than she cared to remember. She had seen wisps of snake sliding off paths so quickly she couldn't be totally certain what they were. She once saw a cobra pooled like a curl of butter in a rock hollow. But she had never had to face one down. Why today? Was this some kind of sign? She didn't buy into superstition. How could you, when you had dived with fate so young, and won?

Maddy had been over and over the statistics. She knew that you had a one in six million chance of being killed by lightning in America each year. You had a higher chance if you were in South Africa, a top country for lightning deaths along with Mexico, Thailand and Brazil. Statistically, by living in two of the top four, her mother had stacked the odds.

If Maddy had gone on to grow up in Florida, the mountainous Mid-West, or New Mexico, instead of on the relatively lightning-light east coast, she would have had a higher chance of being struck a second time. Especially if she played golf. Or had some natural affinity to the stuff, like the park ranger from Virginia who was struck seven different times over 40 years. He lost a toenail, hurt his ankle, burnt his eyebrows, his stomach and his hair. He was knocked unconscious and lost his left shoe. But he lived. Roy Sullivan was his name. When he died, the same year as her mother, it was not from natural – or meteorological – causes. The great lightning survivor took his own life, ostensibly after suffering a broken heart.

Statistically, the chance of running into a snake on this mountain, on an uncharacteristically hot late-winter day, with the ground baked warm to lure out the cold blooded, and a dog flushing out the bushes, was pretty high. A lot higher than getting



struck by lightening. And she'd already accomplished that one. Not that it had left her with any special talents. Not like the doctor struck by lightening in a telephone booth, superman-style, who became a musical savant, giving up his day job to compose and conduct symphonies, even though he had had no prior musical training. Her bolt from the blue had not endowed Maddy with any special talents or abilities. Other than making her a natural conduit for electricity.

There was a staccato flash. Maddy gripped the steering wheel and braced herself for the thunder crack that would follow, counting the seconds to calculate how far away the storm still was.

For a long time after the lightening strike, she had only to go near a socket to feel the current snake out and try to find her. It happened the first night she spent at her Jesus-loving Pittsburgh aunt Bella's shrine of Catholic kitsch. Fresh out of the bath, she sank into the floral pink cover of Bella's too-soft double bed to let her aunt dry her hair. She was desperate for female comfort. Instead, Bella let out a blasphemous screech when the current leapt from the drier to Maddy's head, lifting up strands of her fine long hair with spiked yellow fingers. Maddy hated her new haircut, but she got used to it. Bella took a lot longer to get over the shock.

When Maddy became bored with the numbness of domestic voltage, she discovered pins, then blades. She liked razors, and adjustable box-cutters, but never knives, which were too thick and clumsy. She had a fine grass thicket etched on the underside of her left arm, and a pointillist patch on each knee (one a skull, the other a horse head, but only she could tell which was which).

Eventually these small scars were noticed, but by then Maddy had found a more private, hidden way to punish herself: she could do without food. It was amazing how little you could get by on when nobody was really paying attention.

It was aunt Emily who called her bluff. But that was right at the end, when her childhood was something she was about to escape anyway.

Em's day job at New Yorker magazine had enabled her to open doors for Maddy's mother Sarah, whose talent with paint on canvas catapulted her from the family farm in South Africa to the centre of the sophisticated universe. In time, Em opened this

same world to her niece, but it would be years before Maddy could appreciate what a gift that had been.

Her mother's sister was elegant and urbane. Her father's sisters were so dissimilar it was hard to imagine they shared any heritage at all. Bella was skeletal and blonde, and devoted to her saviour Jesus Christ with a fervour that Maddy could not share. She wanted a flesh and blood father, not this scantily clad man on a cross. But her father was a world away. He had retreated behind his work in the Amazon, dealing with his grief alone. He left Maddy, and her grief, in the care of the ineffectual aunts.

Bella was aunt one. She painted icons on blocked wood canvases, the colours rubbed with gold leaf. Maddy longed to be in one of Bella's pictures. She would never be made holy with a halo, but she wanted to be rendered real, something other than a freak of nature. Bella didn't understand. One day she came home with a framed postcard detail of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco, the part where the hand of God reaches down to give life to Adam. Bella believed that Maddy had been touched by something divine, while all Maddy felt was negated. She did not want to be special in that way.

For a while Maddy endured the strictures of a convent school, but bucked the system whenever she could – on a dare, she went up to receive the body of Christ before being sanctioned by her first communion. When father O'Connor called Bella in to discuss Maddy's transgression, her pious aunt was mortified. But that wasn't the reason she sent Maddy away. The reason was Judd, a Pontiac car salesman who wanted to move her to New Mexico. There Bella would continue to paint her icons, adding desert inspiration to the religious miniatures, finding markets for her Cactus Madonnas and baby Jesuses on burros. Sadly, there would be no place for Maddy.

So Maddy was sent to Baltimore – but not before she was squeezed into a lacy white dress and patent shoes, had her hair tortured into ringlets by Bella's hairdresser neighbour Nancy, who made Maddy hold her breath while she doused her in the contents of an entire can of *Curvy Curl X-tra Hold*. The toxins trailed Maddy like a noxious veil as she walked down the aisle to become Christ's newest bride, too old already at the tender age of eight.

As for Baltimore Dot, the only thing small or pointed about her was the fineness of her scrutiny. You could get nothing past Dot. And so Maddy strove to hide every salient detail of her real self. She gave nothing away.

It's hard to know which came first; Maddy's impenetrability, or Dot's strategic assaults. Dot bought gifts – a new T-shirt, a beading kit, the latest LP of whatever girl band was big at the time – only to snatch them back when she deemed Maddy's display of gratitude inadequate.

Dot cooked elaborate meals and scrutinised Maddy's plate to find what she had left behind. Dot loved cream and pastry, but even tried tempting Maddy with leaf salads and clear soups, only to erupt against the girl's lack of appreciation. For Maddy, abstinence had become both armour and artillery.

The one thing they agreed upon was smell. Dot was an amateur aromatherapist, with a cupboard full of essential oils that Maddy was permitted, under strict conditions, to smell, and a book that detailed the healing properties of each one. Maddy learned that lavender could soothe burns, encourage sleep and neutralise the venom of a black widow spider. She learned the difference between fungus-fighting Australian tea tree and antiseptic Eucalyptus from that same Antipodean outback. Later she would find that what was a national treasure in one country was an alien invader in another – nothing would grow under those silver-barked, soil-acidifying trees in South Africa.

She learned to love the mood lift of geranium – and when she worked with fynbos, much later, the pelargoniums were still favourites. She was drawn to the energising effect of citruses – neroli, ruby grapefruit, mandarin and lime – but repelled by unabashed florals – especially rose, which was Dot's favourite.

On paper, she learned to make tinctures from everyday herbs like basil, rosemary, black pepper and thyme. She dreamed of experimenting with the essences of kitchen spices like cinnamon, clove, coriander and cardamom, mixing them in her imagination with other exotic oils - Indonesian sandalwood, African rosewood, frankincense from southern Arabia, Somalian myrrh, or goatly vetiver from the Philippines. She began to travel, not through images at her father's behest, but through her nose.

It was through Dot's oils that Maddy learned the origins and properties of plants. She inhaled the essences of herbs, grasses, bark, flowers and berries. (Later she could sniff out Em's clandestine drinking by the whiff of juniper).

On bored days, Maddy would creep into the cupboard where Dot kept her oils, cloistered away from heat and light. She would close her eyes, inhale, and imagine forests, or fields, or realms which were neither, but where flowers seemed to hang suspended in air. She didn't know what an epiphyte was, but later grasped why she was drawn to those particular plants – nominally attached to a host, while in reality they lived on nothing but air.

She began to read the labels on lotion and shampoo bottles, recognising calendula and aloe, white ginger and awapuhi, almond and jojoba, along with things like 'Wheatgermamidopropyl Ethyldimonium Ethosulfate' which seemed to have come a very long way on its journey from the plant.

She would smell just about anything, but there was less and less that she would eat. And so, finally, she was dispatched to Emma, the New York aunt, who lived in a lofty land of prose and poetry. Em made sure that Maddy was fed and watered, and then left her to her own devices, most of the time. Maddy thrived under Em's benign neglect. It made her feel capable. Em gave her space to find herself. And space to become restless.

On Em's liberal watch, Maddy started eating, stopped cutting herself, and planned her next escape. She was sixteen. School was too easy, rebellion too obvious.

Her first escape was into story. Em's apartment gave pride of place to books. They were piled up everywhere, sliding out of the shelves, toppling over in huge bedside towers which Em called 'ballycamber', cluttering up the otherwise minimalist furnishings. Maddy was free to browse – *Fear of Flying* or *The Second Sex*, Dostoyevsky or Didion, *The Wasteland* or *Paris Review*; proof copies, review copies, signed copies – she just had to put the books back more-or-less where she found them, because there was, Em insisted, order to the biblio-chaos.

One afternoon her aunt found her spread on a sofa in a patch of late season sunshine, paging through a Time/Life book on Brazil, written by Elizabeth Bishop.

'She hated that book,' Em said, seating herself underneath the *Rothko Red*. Her mother's last painting, the one that could have been inspired by a volcanic sunset, took up

most of the living room wall. ‘She fought bitterly with the Time Life editors. Said they had completely missed her point, about the sensibility of the place.’ She watched Maddy page through the book. In static black and white, Brazil circa 1962 striving to be modern in every sense, emphasising industry and the artifice of its new capitol.

‘She went on a boat trip in Brazil with Aldous Huxley, did I ever tell you that?’ Em was twisting a cigarette into a long ivory holder. ‘I think it was down a tributary of the Amazon.’ Despite her self-destructive tendencies, Maddy had never been tempted to smoke. But she loved the ritual of the tamping and twisting and lighting, watching the pleasure Em derived from that first long deep inhalation. Although Em was the older sister, she still carried herself like a very young woman. She sat sideways in the deep chair, swinging her legs over one arm, holding her cigarette in one hand and a squat tumbler of gin on ice in the other.

‘Maybe you should go visit with your father in Brazil,’ Em said now, on the tail end of a particularly long exhalation. ‘Spend time on the water. Dip your toe into the Amazon, tempt some piranhas. Or what do they call those little razor fish that knife up your urinary tract?’ She shook the tumbler at Maddy so that the ice tinkled in emphasis, and Maddy realised that this drink wasn’t her first for the day. ‘Have some fun.’

Maddy stared over her aunt’s head at the painting, stared at it long enough to lose herself in the green that floated somewhere inside or behind or beyond its layers of red.

Within the month she was getting stoned on a pier with the boat boy who took tourists out on canoe rides to see small Amazon alligators and pink dolphins. She helped him improve his English, he gave her unlimited access to the forest and its waterways. She spent long evenings alone watching voiceless fireflies echo, their lights bouncing conjoined parabolas above and below the glassy water. As above, so below – everything mirrored, and she the fulcrum of it all.

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Marilese’s house was rambling Cape Dutch heritage comfortably gone to seed. ‘Like the rest of her’, Nick once said, with unnecessary meanness. Maddy rose to her friend’s defence; Marilese could make a belted hemp sack look like the latest in eco-wear. And she wouldn’t be caught dead in a pair of Crocs. ‘I’m more scruffy than Marilese will ever be!’

‘You are just perfect,’ he had said, cupping her breasts from behind and pulling the short hairs at the back of her neck with his teeth, making her shiver. ‘Stay like this always.’

Irony was, he wanted the one thing from her that would change everything. Motherhood would turn her into something, or someone, else. Well, all that was about to end, definitively. She would tell him tonight, at the party.

The hot berg wind that had been building all day was gone now, and a chill more appropriate to the season rode in on another growl of thunder as she and Vavi stood outside Marilese’s front door. Her companion looked up at her and wagged his tail reassuringly; this is a dog that can stand up to snakes. This is not a dog that is scared of thunder. Maddy wished she could learn to feel the same way herself. She fought a rising panic as she rang the doorbell a second time, and heard the empty echo of nobody home clanging back to her.

## Cape Town

### 8

The storm broke with such violence that they didn't even have time to race back to the car. Maddy remembers sheltering under the thatched entrance eave, watching hailstones the size of quail's eggs bounce off the paving of Marilese's driveway, making the surface steam. The combination of bouncing ice and rising vapour was hypnotic, and she focused on that small microclimate to distract herself from what was happening in the stratosphere above.

Vavi heard the approaching 4x4 before she did, alerting her with anticipatory tail wagging. Then they were there, electric garage doors opening and dogs exploding out of the car and Marilese shouting 'Bloody hell!' as the dogs she had managed to keep relatively dry on their forest run splashed through puddles to greet their friend Vavi and his human sidekick.

Marilese let Maddy in through the great wooden front door, peering at her through slightly foggy glasses that still managed to magnify her already intense gaze. 'Bloody dogs,' she said again, as her two, plus Vavi, sniffed and skittered around the vast hallway, knocking over a stand of raincoats, gumboots, umbrellas, horse halters and dog blankets. The smell of animals and wood polish was deeply comforting.

'Tea?' It wasn't really a question. Marilese pointed her towards the kitchen. 'Start without me, I'm going to get out of these sweaty things.'

Maddy detoured through the living room. She loved this space – it was large, light and warm, with one glass wall bringing the forest in close, framing mountains to one side and the city's southern suburbs sliding away almost unnoticed on the other. In the kitchen she switched on the kettle, found what she needed for tea. She had done this, here, so many times before.

The refrigerator door was a billboard for perfect family life. To get to the milk in the fridge she had to confront Tristan's latest work of crayon art, a certificate of merit from a local gymkhana, an invitation to a wine tasting.

‘Sorry there was no-one here when you arrived,’ Marilese was rubbing her cropped black hair with a towel. She had changed into something soft and dark that would work in a yoga class or a cocktail function, and the fog had gone from her glasses. She started rinsing cups in the sink. ‘Nkosasana is off sick, Tristan is on a playdate – do you know he asked me to stop calling it that? I have to say ‘arrangement’ now – and Coraline is riding. The place is a mess.’ The air outside was still growling as Maddy picked up the tray and followed Marilese back into the lounge. ‘If this weather clears before you leave I want to show you what I’ve done out back.’

When she and Piet bought it, the place was overrun with Port Jackson – the alien invader from Australia brought in to stabilise the sandy, wind-bitten Cape Flats so that people who fell on the wrong side of the racial classification line could be moved there, freeing up the more pleasant, verdant mountain slopes for those with pale skins and privilege. But *Acacia saligna* didn’t believe in boundaries, and was soon colonising the very spaces that the human newcomers prized most.

Marilese did everything with flair, and her garden was no exception. With advice from Maddy she turned it into an indigenous showcase. She stopped by Maddy’s office in the herbarium building whenever she visited the Kirstenbosch nursery, and she was always first through the gates at the annual plant sale, armed with a list Maddy made for her, to snap up rare and unusual specimens.

She’d come a long way since that first mountain walk in city shoes. Her botanical sketches were exquisitely detailed. She’d sold a series of botanical watercolours at a trendy gallery, then turned them into greeting cards, all proceeds to the Botanical Society. If Maddy were a missionary, she’d consider Marilese her most successful convert.

As she set down the tray a flash of lighting lit up the windowpane, bringing the trees inside and sending the dogs under the table. The accompanying thunderclap momentarily masked the sound of shaking crockery.

‘I move to a place that hardly ever has electrical storms, and look what it still does to me.’ Maddy put one hand over the other to steady the teapot, but her aim still wavered. ‘Maybe I should have faced my demons on the Highveld. How many summers of thunderstorms do you think it would take?’



‘I don’t believe in aversion therapy.’ Marilese took over the pouring. ‘Buddhism is cheaper.’ Instead of wasting money sitting on someone’s couch ‘paying them to care’, Marilese put money each month into a savings account called ‘Tibet’. She’d been twice already, and was angling for Maddy to join her for her next trip. She scooped extra sugar into Maddy’s cup. ‘You look like you need this. Or maybe you need something a little stronger?’

‘No, I’ll save that for Sherman’s tonight. But thanks.’ She took the cup of tea and sipped it gratefully.

‘Ah, the party. I wondered what had you rattled. Besides the storm, that is.’

‘It’s a whole confluence of events, actually.’ Maddy told her friend about the lucky cobra escape, and about the impending trip. Another lightning flash reflected off Marilese’s glasses. ‘Will you get to see your dad?’

‘He might not even be there.’ She let her gaze wander out to the trees beyond the window. ‘You know, when I was little, I thought my father was a noble hero, sacrificing his time with me to help water and feed the world.’ She supposed her three aunts must have encouraged this version of his absence.

‘And then the mighty man fell?’

‘As all mighty mighties must. We had an argument about the Green Revolution. Seems silly now.’

That wasn’t all there was to it, of course. She *had* been horrified to think of the dams her father engineered forcing peasants from productive lands, flooding them to provide irrigation for large mono-culture, hybrid seed schemes dependent on fertilisers provided by the same oil companies who patented the seeds. Tying small farmers into world bank and other ‘soft loans’ that squeezed the life out of them, then broke them, forcing them to leave their small holdings and migrate to the margins of slums and shantytowns. But that was just the cover for her real resentment, which was less noble, more visceral. Still, the old feud provided the only bridge they had, now, to communicate. In 2006, nearly a decade after their final argument, she sent him a postcard of the inauguration of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. She connected the dots for him: sponsored by Ford and the Rockefeller Foundation, Bill Gates and Monsanto. ‘They call it the *Doomsday Vault*,’ she wrote on the back of the card. ‘Interesting choice of name,

don't you think?' More than once, her father had called her an idealistic conspiracy theorist. But she had called him much worse, the last time they spoke.

'They're only human, you know. I guess that's the first hard lesson of childhood. And once you have kids yourself, you realized that only too well!' Marilese leaned over and poured more tea into Maddy's cup.

Maddy envied Marilese her extended family network; not just the wealth and financial security that came with her father-in-law's wine farm, but the Sunday braais with cousins around the pool, the family holidays to the beach house where three generations had spent every summer. The notion of safety in family was archetypal, if not always strictly true. And much as she liked to pretend otherwise, Maddy had always wanted that. But she knew her ideal was a picture borrowed from the squeaky-clean TV shows of her childhood and their attendant product promotions. They were no more real to her actual life than the tokens on Marilese's refrigerator door. Or the kind of ads Nick made.

On cue, Marilese asked the burning question. 'Does Nick know yet? About your trip?' She peered at Maddy through magnified cat's-eyes.

'I'll tell him tonight. At Sherman's.' Maddy couldn't quite get the tone of nonchalance she is looking for, and her voice quivered just a little. 'I don't see how it will make any difference that I'm going. It's so over.'

Marilese put on a diva pose and snapped her fingers sideways. 'A storm, a snake up and a break up,' she sing-songed. 'They say drama always comes in threes.'

The leaves on the trees were blurring, greens running into one another, the canvas too wet.

'I'm really sorry,' Marilese said, much more gently. 'You know he worships you, still. He just doesn't know how.'

'How to what? Stop sticking it to other women?' Maddy was surprised at the power of her own vitriol.

'How to reach you, Maddy.' Marilese leaned forward and reached for Maddy's hand. 'I'm not for one minute excusing any of the things he did,' she said quickly. 'You must know that. We all know he's been behaving like a total prick.' She looked off for a minute as if weighing the implications of her disloyalty. 'But I also know that for a long

time he felt he just couldn't really get *in* there.' Her swam vaguely towards Maddy's chest. 'You did turn down his proposal you know.'

Maddy pulled her hand away. It always came down to this. Nick the victim, spurned. He used to talk about the bigger picture, but 'bigger' was exactly the problem. While he was building Empire Nick, she was getting into smaller and smaller details. On a small tray she would sort the seeds from the base of a mature *Erica Pillansii* flower, the pink tubular bell as long as the nail of her little finger. She would separate petals and calyx, strip out filigrees of stigma and stamen, lift out the seed case with tweezers and put it under the microscope. Sometimes she would have to split the chamber with a razor to tease the seed out – so small it was just the tiniest speck under the naked eye. That moment of excitement before focussing the lens, enlarging that speck to find it perfectly round and covered in soft, luxuriant, shockingly pink fur. Lascivious little seed. On screen it would be played by a bombshell wearing a fluffy boa and feathered mules; the Marilyn Monroe of seeds. As drawn by Dr Seuss. But she couldn't get him to slow down, in the end, to be still long enough to look, let alone see.

'You know, it may not be too late.'

The trees were lit up with a strange light, ominous and otherworldly, sharply defining the leaves. Candlewood. Stinkhout. Yellowwood. Cape Ash. Waterberry....

Maddy excused herself. In the bathroom, on a shelf next to the mirror, a mug that said 'Colgate Cares' held two small, colourful toothbrushes. One was shaped like the squashed blue character from the latest Pixar movie. She half expected it to jump up and start dancing to a tinny jingle. Too much TV, as a kid. The incessant ads, still with her. 'It's not nice to fool Mother Nature!' She remembered the perplexed goddess, all bouffant 70s spoof. But not the product. A margarine?

In between the ads, black-and-white reruns taught her that love was women bashing anguished fists against the chests of the men they desired. Strong men who would pull them close to silence them, looking away over the tops of their heads at something only they could see, while the women kept their eyes tightly shut. Love was Humphrey Bogart slurring on 'schweetheart', it was Lauren Bacall sucking on a cigarette and refusing to leave. It was *To Have and Have Not*.

There was a tube of face cream lying on the shelf. *Water, kelp, alfalfa, sasparilla, black cohosh, saw palmetto, licorice, sage, mullein, fenugreek, hops, peppermint, cayenne, cabbage rose* ... then the part she hated, when the trip around the world culminated in a laboratory – *sodium ascorbate, propylene glycol, glycerin, methylparaben* (the one that causes cancer?), *chloroxylonol*.

Next to it was a small tube of toothpaste, for 'Tiny Teeth'. Maddy looked away, wringing her hands over and over under the warm water.

The sky was still grumbling when she got into her car. Marilese leaned in through the open window to kiss her cheek goodbye. 'Sure you're okay now?'

'Got rubber tyres, I'm shock proof!' She'd be driving under trees all the way home anyway. She always felt safer under a canopy.

## **In Transit**

**[5]**

I'm tired, now, of running against direction over travellers. I must have traversed five miles of airport, terminals one two three and back around again, past the bad-tempered businessmen corkscrewed from pulling their wheelie bags one handed, the frayed families who look like they want nothing more than to sever the tethers that bind their brood. Past the snack stands and the perfumeries, the tired scarf and mascot vendors shutting up shop, pulling their steel grids down until morning.

When was morning? I've lost track of time. The featureless grey sky seems to be paused, waiting. And the people slumped in clusters around defunct departure gates are paused, waiting. The empty chairs are paused, waiting, and the waiter L-bent behind the counter at the juice stand with his head hidden in his folded arms, sleeping – he has run out of fruit, and even in his dreams he is paused, waiting. I wish I could sleep again but I'm too fuelled by something I can't shake.

There's no gym in this airport, so I shouldered my backpack like the turtle willing to win the race and am running, jogging, fast walking, sprinting, down broad passageways too bright with refracted light. And as I come around for the nth time I can see that some of the waiting passengers are paused, waiting, for me, some seem to be counting off the number of times they see me coming. The first few times they smiled and made eye contact, then they looked mildly alarmed and by now they probably wish I would stop pounding past but have just accepted me as part of this long suspended moment. A metronome that doesn't so much mark the passing of time as the inherent rhythm of return contained within it.

Eventually, my way is blocked by an airport guard. He is sympathetic, kind even. Has a kindly little paunch; his tool belt, police issue, has to angle down to accommodate it. No gun here, just a Taser swinging, benign. This is probably like a beach outing, for him. Instead of drug busts and bomb checks he is reuniting wayward children with their families, guiding mothers to places where they can warm milk, managing queues, tempering frustrations, smoothing rough edges. I've become an edge, with my incessant

fast pacing. He understands. But he asks me to please stop. Very polite. The kind of polite that brooks no argument.

What now? The floor is too gleaming, the fluorescent lights, far up overhead in the vaulted ceiling, are too bright. I feel like the marble in a pinball machine. Dizzy. The concourse buzz is a constant background hum, but I can pick out individual sounds, they bounce off me as I career into and away from them – the bleep of cash tills, the electric whine of printers spewing out receipts. Cans clatter against the inside of vending machines, cutlery scrapes against plates, voices rise and fall but mostly mutter complaint. There are occasional announcements, but the signs never change – DELAYED DELAYED DELAYED. *We are sorry for the inconvenience ... Please be patient ... Awaiting update ... No word yet as to when ... Further news to follow shortly.* People gravitate to TV screens, where announcers' voices are falsely anxious and concerned, their eyes bright beneath furrowed brows. The gathered watch the cone-shaped mountain spew smoke, no sign of abating; they wander away again, expectations defeated. They will return again too soon, borne on another wave of hope, only to be dashed.

The huge airport windows, three stories high, are like giant TV screens. The same nothing is happening out there. This stillness feels ominous and wrong. Planes hulk like slumbering giants, all lined up and nowhere to go. Not even the pre-flight safety displays, with the drop down masks, the lifebelt whistles and the head-to-knee crash position convinces passengers of the impossibility of flight. Perhaps they would be more alarmed if they were shown a mathematical equation for Bernoulli's principle, so that they could see how vulnerable they were to density and airflow over wings that defied logic in the first place. Defied logic, but also, luckily, defied gravity. A little like love.

When I was a child I used to enjoy this sense of omnipresence, watching from on high. There would be busy little passengers buses, petrol pumps on wheels, beeping cargo carriers, yellow lights flashing, cranes lifting foil-sealed food trays into the belly of a toy beast to be heated and regurgitated later, somewhere over the Atlantic or the Amazon. All eerily quiet now, they look to me like great silver seedpods, ready to be filled with people who will be transported and dispersed at their destination.

All seeds are made for travel. Some have propellers to carry them, spinning, through great distances of air. Some gust ghost-like on tiny fluffed tendrils. There are

seeds that travel through the guts of birds or elephants, relying on acid to burn a chink in their carapace, so they can sprout when they finally drop to earth encased in nourishing dung.

There are drift seeds designed to float down rivers or bob across oceans – I have a dark brown Sea Heart on my desk at the Institute. I use the *Entada gigas* like a giant worry bead, so it's rubbed even smoother and more glossy. I picked it up on a North Coast beach, far from the tropical Americas where it might have started its journey, before being carried on the gulf stream, whirled in the Equatorial current, caught by the Benguela, swept down around Africa's icy tip and up again to land on more tropical sands of Natal. It sits on my desk next to a framed photograph of Vavilov, stiff-suited, hat in one hand and a sheaf of Mexican corn in the other. And a picture postcard from Em, a New England autumn scene with a quote from Rachel Carson: *Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.*

There were seeds that had been smuggled under the noses of Gestapo agents to end up in Vavilov's Leningrad vault, the ones his fellow plant geneticists died to protect during the 900-day siege.

There were the pips Johnny Appleseed carried in sacks, balancing counterweight on one side of his double-hulled canoe as he travelled up the Mississippi, spreading alien sweetness to pioneer farmers along its banks.

Seeds were carried in pockets, in saddlebags, in tins and barrels and crates. They were secreted across borders, traded at market fairs, sent with daughters as dowry in the high Pamirs between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

There are seeds hoarded by mice in hollows in the ground, seeds stored in chipmunk's cheeks. There are the recalcitrant seeds – acorns, cycads, and coconuts – that needed to stay moist to stay alive. They can't be banked, but cryogenics gives us a way to keep them, flash frozen in a kind of reverse microwave oven.

The seeds most useful to humans – for food, medicine, fuel – are kept and cared for in over 1500 seed banks around the world. And there are those that have not yet been identified, that have no apparent use, that are there just for their own sake, working quiet miracles in their ecosystems, unseen, as yet unrecognised.

And there are so many more that have already been lost, through habitat destruction and ignorance. More than one in five of the plants that are left face extinction.

There are the survivors. Seeds that have been on incredible journeys, survived intractable hardships, beaten impossible odds. Like the ancient Mesopotamian seeds saved from a war-plundered Abu Ghraib. Most people don't realise that it was a famous centre for biodiversity, before it become an infamous prison.

And there is my seed, *Newbouldia mundii*. My Saint-Exupéry planet of a seed, ridged with tiny volcano spikes, containing everything it needs to come to life when conditions are right, when it's ready to be nurtured by human hands, praised and prized for what it contains that can soothe and heal. What kind of transit had it endured, what rough sea voyage, what enforced dormancy, what narrow escapes, what long limbo, before it arrived on new and fertile soil? What helped it survive? Which mutations, over time, made it more suitable for its Brazilian here and now than its African there and then?

I gave in and found a bar. Even here there is no escape from the monochrome flight board, with its suspended arrivals and departures. An island of digital serenity. I pity the air traffic controllers who untangle those flight paths, each one an essential vector. Plugged into other monitors, elsewhere, with too much caffeine in their veins, blinkered from the kaleidoscope chaos of down here, where every single person pegs their life on their faith that the controllers will make sure those vectors never intersect.

But even those small gods can do nothing about angry volcanoes.

The unpronounceable ash-spewer is still top news, but the ticker tape running along the bottom of the screen tells of other events. A dispute threatens the Pakistan-India one day international (limited overs). Wild fires are spreading through Russian wheat fields that were tinder dry from drought. Life goes on, the ticker reassures us. But I feel anything but reassured by the last item. Vavilov should be turning in his grave. Half a century after the great food geneticist's death, GM foods are infiltrating the natural gene pools and the world has welcomed hybrids containing 'terminator genes' that stop plant reproduction. Stop it so that farmers have to keep coming back to the artificial source – the company – for their next season's seed.



Ownership issues aside, what if that terminator gene went rogue? Began spreading to other plants? It's unthinkable, but I spend way too much time thinking about it. About what *would* happen if the current of life was turned off at the mains. There would *be* no more life. Not without plants.

My last big argument with my father was about this. Ostensibly. He accused Vavi of being a communist plant – 'Ha ha,' I said – and I accused him and the people he worked for of using the notion of feeding the world as a cover for gaining control of precious natural resources, and playing god with them. 'They're men just like you,' I told him. 'Who think they can do what they want without consequence.'

I was a little bit drunk at the time. In a bar in Manaus. Too many gin-and-tonics. I used to drink them in malaria areas for their prophylactic effect, even though gin makes me morose. And belligerent.

I don't drink them anymore. I prefer the amber comfort of whiskey. There's one sweating on the countertop in front of me. I'm tempted to have another.

I accused Bill of being brought up in a family of girls who fed his ego and fostered the selfishness that drove my mother over the edge, even before the lightning took her.

'The lightning didn't take her, Maddy...'

I hated him when he denied it. 'No? Then maybe you killed her yourself.'

I have a recurrent memory. Not triggered by a smell, or linked to a place. The sense kind, that engulfs me at random moments. What I remember is the back of him, leaving the bar. How vulnerable the nape of his neck looked. My father the child. I didn't want to feel sorry for him. I wanted to continue to be furious.

I think what I feel when I have that memory is ashamed.

I didn't see him the next morning, before I took the first plane out. We haven't spoken since.

## Cape Town

### 9

Sherman's apartment exuded ironic retro-kitsch. Every object was artfully placed to disallow any suspicion of their owner's vulnerability. She remembers how it was that night, low-lit, filled with music from the coffeelands, the tang of skunk wafting in from the kitchen balcony.

Kolwande stuck out among the people lying louche on low couches. Upright as always, he was holding forth around a sleek table that had a long line of blue-bellied flame licking out of a slit in the middle of it. Maddy hated that table. She was always tempted to lie herself down on that flame and let the heat of it slice her open.

There was no sign of Nick. Through the dim she could make out Justine wedged into the window corner that pointed like a glass prow over Kloof street. Sherman liked to call the flat his 'cruise-liner'.

Justine was talking to a man Maddy recognised as responsible for one of the paintings on the walls, an ersatz Tretchikoff with a blue-tinged woman and arum lilies. The artist was notoriously lecherous. As he bent down to light a cigarette at the table flame, Justine widened her eyes at Maddy and made gagging gestures over his shoulder.

Sherman was at her elbow, handing her an empty martini glass and juggling something icy in a silver shaker. It poured out into the glass, frothy, lime-scented and tart-cold on her tongue.

'God I needed that.'

Sherman clinked her glass with a small blue bottle of sparkling mineral water. 'You shouldn't stay away so long. You know we're always here to take the edge off.'

Maddy's answer was supposed to be a smile, but you couldn't hide from Sherman. He saw everything, judged ferociously, but let his friends off lightly. For the past year he'd been fence-sitting on the matter of Maddy and his old schoolmate. She hoped he wouldn't feel forced to take sides when the split became final.

'Nick said he had some agency thing first.' He watched her over the bottle as he took a swig.

‘What’s with the water – you detoxing?’

Sherman shook his head. ‘Long story.’ The door buzzer sounded. ‘Later Luscious!’

She started weaving her way over to Justine, catching threads of conversation.

*Vipassana is so hard core, man. It’s like Buddhist bootcamp ... It’s their biggest account – the agency will have to retrench half their staff ... I wanted to do Africa Burn in a retro Winnebago, but some guy bought every one in the country and put them up on the roof of a hotel downtown...*

A woman she didn’t recognise was talking to a welder who made huge metal sculptures for the annual desert event, carting tons of steel into the Karoo and back out again afterward, charred and replete. She supposed he might be able to tell the woman how to get a Winnebago off of a high-rise building.

This crowd was different from her botanical one. Cape Town was a catch net for hippies in all guises, but this set was faster and more furious. It was Nick’s world, but also reminded her of her aunt’s New York art scene. The too, too fabulousness of it all. Her memories, magnified in the way of childhood recall, were of a low lit, smoky room like this one, only more brown and 1970s shag, her mother’s Rothko Red dominating; slurred words and sloshed drinks and too friendly hands, too trilling laughter. She had no way of knowing, through that retro amplifying lens, whether the people at her aunt’s parties had been as tied up in complexities of place as these ones were. This southern tip, far from everywhere, this collection of tribes out of place in transitional time, never ceased to challenge her. It was one of the things – beside the uniqueness of the floral kingdom – that kept her here. It was such a *discomfort* zone, and this suited her fine. She didn’t know how to feel secure, to belong, anywhere, or to anyone.

By the time she reached Justine her glass was empty, but fighting her way back to the kitchen bar felt like too much effort. In the street below car lights tumbled down the slope towards the harbour. At the traffic lights they would be surrounded by street kids who were too seldom lucky; these cars were armour-cladded, inside and out.

Justine grabbed her wrist and pulled her onto the couch, wedging Maddy between herself and the letch artist, who was deep in debate with Kolwande about the significance of *Die Antwoord*.

‘Bart,’ Justine tugged on his sleeve. ‘Go get us that pitcher of punch from Sherman won’t you?’ She was poured into a red dress that showed off her considerable charms, but still Bart ignored her. His nose was veined from alcohol although he couldn’t be much past forty.

‘What do you mean Steve Biko said it first?’ His eyes blazed at Kolwande.

‘Have you even *read* Steve Biko, Bart?’ Justine had to lean over Maddy to goad him now, and it was making her claustrophobic. She looked down into her empty glass as if willing it to fill by magic. Here we bloody go again.

‘I bet he never said, “Black, white, coloured – everything fucked into one person”!’ He emphasised the obscenity, putting his whole body behind it. If there had been anything left in her glass, it would have spilled.

‘You’re right,’ said Kolwande. ‘He used a lot more finesse.’

When Maddy came to Cape Town as an adult ten years ago, she’d expected to find the kind of hybridity that characterised most of the post-modern ‘new world’. What she found instead was dislocation – a state she was only too familiar with, but had not expected in people born, bred and raised to a place. But even their shared sense of displacement didn’t seem enough to bind people together, to offer a container for the elements to merge and converse, to find and celebrate one another. There was extreme bipolarity, still, between black white and everyone else. People defined and redefined themselves, without ever updating the criteria.

Kolwande looked like he was enjoying himself. ‘Breyten Breytenbach, your albino terrorist and über Afrikaner, called his own people a bastardised nation obsessed with purity,’ he said. ‘Didn’t *Die Antwoord* simply hijack the gangsta rap style to say exactly the same thing?’

Suddenly, she was looking forward to a respite from the incessant self-questioning. Living here was a lesson in the impossibility of the non-position. Wherever you stood, just by being here, you were taking a stand. Maddy was always surprised to find people who actually felt they belonged here. Or maybe they just chose to stay blinkered to the fact that they didn’t.

During apartheid’s dark days, much of the alternative Afrikaner artistic set countered evil by being as eccentric as they could. Now the source of evil was harder to

pin down. Struggle heroes had become self-serving. Ordinary people felt powerless. The place had lost its moral centre. It spun her head.

In contrast, Brazil felt like a nation on the up, in love with its lucky mix.

Bart was frowning so hard his eyes were squint. ‘Sherman you *moffie*!’ he yelled out, startling everyone into momentary silence. ‘Bring us some more of that bloody drink!’ He turned to Kolwande. ‘*Wat Pomp Julle*,’ he began after a dizzy pause, ‘is a celebration of poor white counter-culture.’

‘Or,’ Justine tossed her curls and batted her eyelids in a frighteningly accurate Kewpie parody, ‘a deep expression of intense – if maybe unconscious – self-hatred?’

‘Ok, *chune* us then, Mr and Mrs Black-like-me-is-Beautiful,’ A white clot of spittle had gathered in the corner of Bart’s mouth as he struggled to complete the thought. Kolwande helped him out by putting his hand over his heart and reciting: ‘For a genuine fusion of the life-styles of the various groups, each must be able to attain its style of existence without encroaching on or being thwarted by another.’ He lowered his hand. ‘*That’s* what Biko said.’

Maddy could imagine being one of his patients, lulled into serenity while he explained the life-or-death complexities of impending anaesthesia. But Bart wasn’t calmed.

‘Ag *jisses* man!’ He shook his empty tumbler futilely over his gaping mouth. ‘You all talk *kak*!’ He stood up and stumbled towards the kitchen.

‘Good riddance Hum-bart Hum-bart,’ Justine muttered, pushing Maddy over to fill the space Bart left. ‘I can’t believe how well you humour him, K.’

Kolwande shrugged. ‘So Miss Flowers, where have you been hiding?’

‘Where is that *drink* hiding?’

And there was Sherman, bearing down on them, twirling his shaker of elixir. He squashed in next to Justine and reached over her to fill their glasses. Maddy drained hers and immediately held it out for another. Sherman filled it again to the brim. She was starting to feel much, much better. ‘This would work well with *cachaça*, you know that? I’ll bring you some back from Brazil.’

‘You’re going to Brazil?’ All eyes on her now.

‘Looks like it.’

‘Rio?’ It was everybody’s first stop.

‘Salvador. Much further up.’

‘Little Africa.’ Kolwande leaned in.

‘You’ve been there?’

He shook his head. ‘Always wanted to. I have a friend from there.’

‘What’s he say about it?’

‘She.’ He was staring into the table flame, thoughts flickering elsewhere. ‘It’s a powerful place.’

‘This plant we’re looking for, theory is it was taken over there by slaves from West Africa...’

‘So you can kind of complete the triangle,’ Sherman suggested. ‘You know, Africa, Brazil...’

‘There are three sides to a triangle Sherman darling.’ Justine took the shaker from him and coaxed the last dregs into her glass.

‘New York,’ Maddy thought out loud.

‘Well, whatever. If you don’t take in a bit of the big A on the way back we’ll just say you’re closing a circle.’ Sherman wrapped his lips around his blue bottle.

‘They used to be a perfect fit, the bulges of West Africa and South America.’ Kolwande curved the palm of his right hand to cup his left fist. ‘Used to lie together, like this.’

‘Ooh, spooned lovers!’ Justine adjusted her cleavage, which was in danger of busting out. How much had she had to drink? In Maddy’s own mind, which felt considerably more relaxed than when she’d arrived, the spooned continents swirled together into a conjoined yin-yang.

‘Alas, poor lovers – continental drift tore them apart.’ Kolwande released his hands and let them fall into his lap.

Maddy wondered about the ‘friend’. She sensed there was a story there. ‘In a way, the Atlantic slave trade linked them back together.’

‘There is a seed of light even in the darkest dark.’

Perhaps the alcohol was having more of an effect than she thought – had Kolwande just described the picture inside her head? She was following the little star

seed, taken over in a pocket, or caught in the hem of a blanket. It would have crossed the Atlantic and tipped up in soil far away from – but not so very different from – its home ground. After all, they had once been connected, as Kolwande said.

Justine was still shaking the upended shaker over her empty glass. ‘If I go make you another one of those Bart will be back here to take my place in a flash,’ Sherman told her. They all looked over to Bart, glowering on the edge of the crowd around their seated circle, clutching a tumbler full of something amber.

‘Please don’t go Sherman. Here.’ Maddy offered Justine her own glass.

‘Sweet Jesus this is good.’

Justine had all but drained it when Maddy claimed it back. ‘What are you doing drinking mineral water when you can make concoctions like these?’

‘In a way, it was spirits that got me here.’ Sherman was a small man. Just then, putting on a faux-Irish lilt, with his little goatee and sideburns, he reminded Maddy of a leprechaun. The story of his newfound abstinence turned out to be a ghost story.

Sherman had put everything he had into an upcoming exhibition for his new gallery. When the collection was held up in customs, threatening the opening date, and leaving him with all the bills to pay, his entire art enterprise was on the line. ‘I was sick with worry. Sick! I couldn’t eat – but I could drink. God, did I drown my sorrows!’ He swigged hard at the water, as if he wished it were something else. ‘Then one morning I woke up horribly *babelaas*, and spoke to my Grandma about the problem.’

‘Your *dead* grandma?’

‘Yes. I did a little ceremony, quietly, just me and her.’

‘What, incense, flowers, little white candles?’

‘Shush!’ Maddy elbowed Justine in the ribs.

‘And she was there. And she told me, “Everything will come out alright, my boy, but you have to stop this drinking.”’

She was struggling to silence her own inner sceptic, but still Maddy clamped down Justine’s leg to stop her saying anything else.

‘Which is ironic, because you know what an old piss-cat she was. She gave me my first shot of whiskey, age 10. My reward for reaching double digits, she said. So I knew she must be serious. “Granny,” I told her, “if you help me with this thing, I won’t

touch a drop for a month. I promise.” ’ He sat back, satisfied, and took another long swig from his water bottle.

‘And?’

‘And the next day they released my shipment. That was three weeks ago – as you know, the opening went off fabulously.’ He clinked his bottle on Kolwande’s beer. ‘I haven’t touched a drop since. Feels marvellous, actually.’

Justine’s giggling was contagious. Sherman the cynic practising ancestor worship? There were plenty of white sangomas in their crowd, but this felt slightly absurd. His grandmother was *Scottish*, for Pete’s sake, although there was some Lebanese and some Dutch in his DNA.

‘Maybe I shouldn’t bring you that bottle of cachaça then.’

‘Oh, bring that bottle sweetie,’ he said. ‘Bring ten. I’ve only got a week of sobriety left.’ He leaned in, mock serious. ‘Just don’t piss off any ancestors while you’re over there. I have a whole new appreciation for their power.’



## In Transit

[6]

I know I'm going to gamble; it's only a matter of when.

I can't face Rastaman. Who has a name now: Roberto. Since he voyeured on my grief, my scoop chair archipelago feels unstable. Anyway, I have all my things with me now. If I've lost my chairs, so be it.

The first available hotspot space is at a Starbucks. Someone has tuned the TV to a sports channel. It's a football chat show, but even the soccer buffs are talking about the volcano.

*It's so unpredictable really, the commentator says in a thick North London accent. You watch the patterns and then you think, this is the way the narrative is going to go and then – BAM – something unexpected happens.*

The whiskey didn't help, but a few hands of Texas Hold'em might. I check my email while I wait for Poker Party to load. Add my name to a petition, 'Protecting Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization'. What a mouthful of marbles. But as governments become more vigilant about protecting indigenous knowledge and resources, so unscrupulous companies become more desperate to get their hands on exclusive genes. Enforcing the Nagoya Protocol is no easy task. Whatever happened to seeds being 'the most democratic experience on the planet', as Vandana Shiva famously said? Much as they might try to spread their abundance, plant genes were being straitjacketed by ownership, restriction, control. Their escape routes blocked, their natural terrains fenced in and tarred over.

I don't believe that adding my digital signature will make a jot of difference to combating bio-piracy, but it can't do any harm. Plus I always feel a frisson of inappropriate pleasure when I see the word 'biopiracy' – I can't help picturing my colleagues raising Jolly Rogers in the field where they squat and munch trail mix. It might be a dirty word, but I can see the benefit of bending the rules, if it benefits a species, rather than some corporation. I can't see any of my colleagues being turned by the lure of money. But if they thought they were saving the planet? They'd hoist the flag.

I've probably crossed paths with biopirates without even knowing it. I wonder if anyone else is on the *Newbouldia* trail. At least there's nothing clandestine in my mission. Brazil and South Africa both signed the Convention of Biodiversity, so both can supply seed samples to the Millenium Seed Bank under its Access and Benefit Agreement. I have my letter from the institute, and there's a professor at a Salvador university who'll introduce me into my first *terreiro*. From there it'll just be a matter of getting the state permissions. Kirk should have put in the applications already. 'You don't need a visa to go into Brazil,' he reminded me. 'Just go in as a tourist, we'll take care of the paperwork as and when you find the seeds.'

The barista signals that my latte is ready. I've given in to coffee mode, since resistance will be futile, soon enough. And the tea here has been predictably disappointing. The airport Starbucks might be running low on all 1001 flavours, but the mermaid on the cup seems to me to be gripping both sides of her split tail in orgiastic glee. Food vendors and mobile airtime sellers are both doing a killing right now.

I log in as 'Wisteria Jayne' and while I wait for a game to start my email alert flashes. It's from Em. She's up late. Or early. The subject: '*On our earth we are much too small to clean out our volcanoes. That is why they bring no end of trouble upon us.*' All Em's emails have literary quotes in the subject line. I recognise this one, from *The Little Prince*. Funny that – I don't think I mentioned my little planet seed to her?

*What a troublesome little berg, and now there you all are, grounded and circling one another like animals in a zoo, with no way out! How perfectly awful. I hope you are taking notes.*

At times like this I really miss my aunt. Maybe I should visit her on the way back, like Sherman suggested? I have enough money for a quick side trip to New York, thanks to my nest egg of stashed poker winnings.

Em doesn't know about my poker habit. Hardly anybody does. But then, everybody needs a secret. Mine is my unexpected talent for cards. Poker is the one place where I am infinitely patient. I bide my time and strike when the time is right. If I play tight, curb my tendency to be reckless, the winnings pile up.

The game is about to start. I'll mail Em later. The first hand I'm dealt is my favourite. Aces and eights, the 'Dead Man's Hand' – the one Wild Bill Hickok was holding when he made his last stand in a town called Deadwood. It's the only hand I allow myself to be a little bit sentimental about. But I'll take some time to suss out the rest of the table. Fold and observe.

Wild Bill was a gentleman frontiersman, shot in the back by a coward with a vendetta while he sat, winning cards in hand. The moral of the story? Watch your back.

I sometimes wonder which is my truer nature – the death wish or the slow steady hand. But I won't get a chance to test my mettle this time around. There's a wave of excitement sweeping through the concourse. The flight ban has been lifted. The planes are starting to move.

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## Cape Town

### 10

The narrow metal balcony off Sherman's small kitchen was crowded, so she and Kolwande squeezed together on one of the fire-escape steps, a few rungs down. A fog of reefer smoke hung fragrant above them.

It turned out he knew quite a bit about Salvador, thanks to the friend who grew up in the *candomblé* tradition. Kolwande wouldn't be drawn about the girl, but he told Maddy plenty about the factions within and between some *terreiros*, many of which counted influential government and society figures among their members.

When it came to plants, Kolwande told her, each *terreiro* had its own 'special' herbs, specific to it alone and shared with no one. While many were common to them all, sharing roots in both Africa and Brazil, there were sacred plant lines unique to particular *terreiros*, which they would go to great lengths to protect. 'If your seed is so rare,' Kolwande said, 'It could well be one of those that are most sacred. What makes you think you can just walk in there and ask them to hand it over?'

'My irresistible charm?'

'Exceptional it may be, but...' Kolwande took a long swig of beer.

'Their innate altruism?'

'Even you are not that naïve, flowergirl.'

'Look, I'm offering to protect the plant, take it from the brink of extinction and ensure that it survives into the future, whatever that might hold for the planet, for its natural habitat. That's a *good* thing. Surely they will see the benefit in that?'

'And what's in it for them? If they are taking perfectly good care of the plant themselves – enough to guarantee enough leaf to do what they need to do, why on earth should they share any of it with you?'

Maddy had no answer. He was right, annoyingly. 'For a doctor you know an awful lot about this. What is this, your grandma's Yoruba root wisdom?'

‘As it happens my grandmother was full of old-school Yoruba wisdom. But no. My friend got caught up on the wrong side of this and it was scary stuff.’ Somebody passed a reefer down from above. K took a long toke and passed it on to Maddy. ‘I’m just saying.’ The last part came out in a swallowed rush as he tried not to exhale.

Maddy was starting to feel pleasantly light-headed. ‘You’re not trying to scare me off with voodoo are you?’

‘Look, it’s not about right or wrong or what you believe. You don’t have to believe in it, just know that belief itself is powerful juju.’

‘I should believe in belief? A hardened atheist like me?’ She met his sceptical look as she handed back the joint. What *did* she think about the power of belief? She hadn’t had much positive role modelling, when it came to religious conviction. But she did believe in science. Not only the parts you could prove, but the unfathomable mysteries. Especially the mysteries. What was it Einstein said? It took her a moment to find the words. ‘The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. I believe that.’

The look he gave her was loaded with gravitas. ‘Candomblé is not just some colourful cultural tourism stop, Maddy. People live and die by it. And it’s ancient. That’s all I’m saying.’ He flicked the roach over the stairwell railing, and they both watched its spark flare briefly as it fell into the well of the courtyard below. ‘Your science and mine, they are irrelevant in that world. Bear that in mind, and be careful. That’s all.’

## Cape Town

### 11

Even before Nick arrived, but after a few too many refills from the silver flask, Maddy started feeling that bittersweet sense of impending loss that comes in the midst of a perfect moment. The way you can be enjoying something so desperately that you want to cry, not because the moment lacks anything, but because nothing, ultimately, can fill the gulf of need that lies beneath it, no matter how scintillating the conversation or how lovely the conversationalist or how exotic the setting. You just suddenly want to cry. But you can't, so you turn on the high beams instead. And with enough alcohol, it almost works.

Of course, he made an entrance. Looking perfectly dishevelled, as if he'd forgone basic grooming in the hurry to grace them with his presence – even though she knew the clothes were top-end and the bed-head lovingly gelled. He brought a celebrity appendage; she was tall and willowy and wearing a knock-out dress that seemed to be made of nothing but plastic discs, artfully wired together. Everyone was staring at it to find strategic gaps to see what was underneath. The two of them seemed to be glowing with shared fabulousness. Or shared stimulant. It didn't help that Maddy knew that the soap star – appropriately named Candy – had recently sunk to a new low to feed her habit. It was one of those excruciating toilet cleaner ads where a celebrity knocks on your door and asks to inspect the smears on your porcelain. Suspension of disbelief aside, who would *ever* entertain such a request? To up the celebrity quotient, Candy was usually accompanied on her TV household visits by a rugby flank, an affable giant loved by everyone. He wasn't here now, so she was slumming it with the campaign manager instead.

'Oh my God, not the toilet queen!'

At times like this Maddy really loved Justine.

They met in the kitchen. Nick was drunk, but not too drunk to register her recoil from his sour breath when he leaned in to kiss her cheek.

‘You drove like that?’ she hadn’t intended for it to sound so accusatory. These days their every interaction clanged wrong.

‘What’s this about Brazil?’

Maddy knew Sherman was a fast operator, but she was surprised at just how fast.

And just then, the thought of Brazil – her Brazil, lush and green and thrumming with a rhythm her blood once beat to, one that was familiar enough to feel comfortable in and vast enough for her to lose herself in, *that* Brazil felt safe. She wanted to be where she would be unknown. Encased in a kind of cultural cotton wool, with the excuse of work and the promise of some kind of homecoming, if she wanted it. In no time at all she fell from the edge of indifference to a plateau of total certainty.

‘It’s just a work trip,’ she lied.

‘When?’

‘Soon as.’

‘Thanks for letting me know.’

‘I just found out today.’

Standing there, she felt suddenly, deeply tired of the thrust and parry, of waiting to duck the next punch, anticipating hurling one of her own. She looked down at his shoes – he always wore sneakers, even when he was wearing a suit. It was his trademark. Childlike. Disarming. She caught a whiff of perfume, feminine. Not his smell.

‘I see you brought your work with you. Or is she just another expedient exaggeration?’ She hated herself for the words the minute they left her mouth.

‘Hitchcock!’ He laughed too loudly. It was their favourite line from *North by Northwest*. Cary Grant striding between skyscrapers, claiming there was no such thing as a lie in advertising.

His laugh dropped suddenly and his mood veered, in the way of the extremely inebriated. ‘We’ve hardly seen each other. I don’t know where you’re at.’ He was ducking down, weaving in front of her, trying to catch her eye. Trying to be cute. But for an instant he reminded her of the cobra. Had that really only been a few hours ago?

She refused to meet his eye. He hated that. Had never understood that it was her way of angling away from feelings so they would slide right off her.

‘Look at me.’ He grabbed her arm too roughly. ‘Look at me!’

She pulled her arm away, stepped back. 'We're over, Nick.'

'You're doing this here? Now?' His indignation was mostly genuine.

'I'm sorry.' She reached out a hand but he held a finger up to stop her. Swayed, steadied himself with a flattened palm on the balcony balustrade. She hadn't realised he was that drunk. Then he leaned in close again. 'If you insist on setting traps,' he hissed thickly, 'make sure you can deal with the beast you catch.'

She wasn't even going to try to figure out what he meant. Not now anyway. She imagined that he had rehearsed the line, tried it out in his head, waiting for a chance to use it.

She left him leaning heavily on the balustrade, focussing on something way out further than the stars.

She would start again. In Brazil.



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## **PART TWO**

### **INCOMING**

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## Salvador, Bahia

### i

Maddy stepped off the plane and was pleasantly assaulted by dense, steamy, air. There was the scent of a new place, taken in for the first time only once. The thrill of the unfamiliar, before it becomes mundane.

This was not the Manaus of her early childhood – the sandy settlement carved out of endless green, the last outpost into the mighty river, feeling vulnerable despite its airport and its baroque opera house. It wasn't *every square inch filled with foliage*, which was how Elizabeth Bishop visualised the way nature greeted the Portuguese explorers who first landed in Rio's Guanabara Bay, in her poem 'Brazil, January 1, 1502':

*...big leaves, little leaves, and giant leaves,  
blue, blue-green, and olive,  
with occasional lighter veins and edges,  
or a satin underleaf turned over*

There was very little green in this tapestry so far, despite the tendency for tropical plants to find foothold in any neglected gap. The graffiti was more profuse – every spare space was tagged, and each artist seemed to respect what went before, finding new spaces to fill, rather than writing over the old. Concrete jungle flowers.

Most of them were monochrome, black on grey. The people crowding the streets were another story. Maddy remembered how Brazilians had confounded their census-accountants with poetry back in 1998, describing themselves in terms more delicious than anything you could tick inside a regulatory box. *Caramel*, they wrote alongside the space reserved for skin-colour, *burnt sugar*, *chocolate*, *toast*, *coffee-with-cream*. That year, there were 143 different answers applied to the question of race – including 'navy-blue', 'green', and 'the colour of a fleeing ass'. Burros aside, the coffee in Salvador was deeper and darker than anywhere else in Brazil.

‘What are they selling?’ she asked her taxi driver Fernando as they passed a group of Baiana women gathered in a square. They wore full white skirts, their hair tied up in white headscarves. Modest clothes from another era; worn in this one as a mark of pride. *Emancipate yourself from mental slavery...*

‘*Acarajé*,’ he said over his shoulder. ‘Beans, shrimps and spices, fried in *dendê*. Foods of their orixás.’ He pronounced it ‘orishas’. The candomblé deities. Her window was open to let in the humid tropical air, but the stalls were just too far away for Maddy to smell the oil and the spice over the smog and diesel. After three days eating in airplanes and airports, her mouth watered at the thought of real food. She watched St Christopher slide from side to side and wondered how Fernando felt about those other gods. *Their orixás*. Or if, like most Salvadorians, he managed to comfortably accommodate multiple pantheons. ‘You will try some,’ he added, with total certainty. ‘Very delicious.’

She had been surprised when Fernando met her at the airport, her name scrawled on a white sheet of paper, clutched to his bony chest. ‘Three days, we waited for you,’ he told her with what she would come to recognise as his trademark poker face. Senhor Fernando was nominally attached to the *pousada* guesthouse she had booked in Pelhourinho. Apparently plane schedules weren’t the only ones the volcano messed with.

The traffic congealed in a hub crowded with billboards. Poster-sized families were happy here the same way they were anywhere else – in bright primary colours and with the help of the right kind of cola, followed by the perfect toothpaste to counteract decay.

They were probably much the same in 1951, when Elizabeth Bishop arrived in Brazil for a short holiday. She ate the fruit of a *caju* and became violently ill. She didn’t know that, improperly shelled, the seed of the ubiquitous cashew nut is as toxic as its cousin poison ivy. Some people even react badly to the fruit. Swollen and bloated like a blowfish, Elizabeth was still able to captivate Maria Carlota Costallat de Macedo Soares, a Carioca architect and intellectual. *Lota* became the love of her life. Elizabeth stayed in Brazil for 15 years.

During that time the poet won the Pulitzer Prize and was commissioned to write a Time Life book on Brazil – the same one Maddy paged through that gin-soaked afternoon

when Em suggested she tempt some Amazonian piranhas. That was the beginning of her love affair with plants.

Bishop's love for plants, like Maddy's, started in Brazil. These were the kind of connections Em loved to cultivate.

The book she gave Maddy was autographed. At first, Em told her, Bishop had refused to sign it, horrified by what the Life editors had done to her book, slashing and burning her thickets of words. Excising her love of nature. It was all wrong. As for the photographs -- 'Not a single bird, beast or flower -- in Brazil!' the poet lamented to her friend Robert Lowell.

Somehow Em convinced her to sign. Many was the time the young Maddy had traced her finger over the fierce scrawl on the inside cover. *Do not believe a word of this false propaganda* it said, the letters small and slanted. *Discover for yourself.* Her aunt had never been to Brazil. She encouraged Maddy to do the discovering instead.

The colour began seeping into the city as the taxi ascended the hill to the Cidade Alta -- the 'high city'. Not just green, but candy-coated. Pelourinho showed off its colonial accoutrements like an aging belle swishing mouldy petticoats. The streets grew narrower as they spiralled up the hill. Tall buildings leaned in across cobbled lanes to talk about old times. The taxi sputtered and strained to the summit, to an open square where Fernando cranked up his hand-brake and stopped to orient her and, Maddy suspected, to give his car a breather.

The buildings wore ice cream colours -- peppermint and strawberry, tangerine and caramel. Some faded, some brightly repainted with iced white detailing. The arched windows looked like cartoon eyes lashed with filigreed wrought-iron balconies. Some of the walls wore the grime of ages; mould and fungus and black smoke streaks. The roofs were covered in curved terra cotta tiles in variegated colours. They stretched down the hill to her right, reminding Maddy of a calico cat, while to her left the pastel facades culminated at the top of the hill in a tall, pale blue church. Twice as high as its neighbours, it reminded her of an over-optimistic wedding cake; an ornate architectural triumph of hope over experience.

'Largo do Pelourinho,' Fernando said, jerking his head up the hill toward the slanted square. The whipping post. Maddy had read about it online when she booked her

room. Named after the activity that defined this area at the height of the slave era. Some of the light and colour seemed to blink out of the scene around her, as if her camera eye had notched down a stop. A dark stream bled down the gutter on one side of the steep street, a paper wrapper floating down on it. Everything around her suddenly looked a little bit darker, through the lens of its history.

Her pousada was in a cobbled lane, reached via a maze of back-roads and side-streets – not far as the crow flies, or even on foot, but 20 minutes by car, thanks partly to a delivery truck whose driver was deep in conversation with a *dona* on a balcony in a t-shirt and hot-pants.

Fernando left her outside the *Lua Azul*, with a reminder that he was but a phone call away. He warned her not to venture into the neighbourhood alone at night, and refused the tip she offered him on top of his fee. Then he was gone with a sulphurous backfire bang.

She would have liked to explore the neighbourhood, find a good meal. She would have liked to have stretched out on the flat bed, cooled by the ceiling fan blading indolently overhead, and let her thoughts drift through out the blue painted shutters and over the industrial grey ocean that stretched back towards where she had just come from. But thanks to the volcano's tantrum, she had lost two days. There was a message for her at reception from Ernesto, her *terreiro* contact. There was a ceremony at the *Ile Axé Bencois*, tonight, and they were expecting her.

Fernando and his taxi had only just made it down to the lower city when she called him back up the hill. She barely had time now to shower and change. Tonight would be her first introduction to candomblé. Wear white, Ernesto had said.

## Salvador, Bahia

### ii

About an hour into the ceremony, her body had begun to recognise the pulse-quickenings that heralded the arrival of each new orixá. Before the costume changes, before the colour shifts, even before the drawing inward of a dancer, when a new spirit was about to take over a corporeal son or daughter and spin a new story, Maddy felt the shift in rhythm. Drum beat, heart beat, signature beat.

The drumming was relentless and hypnotic. Each change in tempo was also a change in energy and personality, taken in, communally, by all the participants in the ceremony, whether initiate, elder, or visitor – tourist, local or ‘other’, like herself.

She was sitting in the women’s section, which faced the men’s along one side of the *barracão*. Toward the front of the hall, doors led to rooms from which plates of food and more vividly-costumed celebrants emerged at irregular intervals.

There were two sets of doors at the back of the hall. Men and women streamed in and out, separately, to and from the dark, cooling night.

Maddy had arrived late, but found a place in the beat and the body crush on the cement bench about three tiers up from the floor. She mentally distanced herself from a group of excitable blonde tourists, and focussed instead on a row of local girl children just in front of her.

The children were small and nimble and preoccupied with sharing out a packet of coloured sweets – the candy-coated chocolate kind.

The little girl directly in front of Maddy had dark hair tightly braided with white ribbons at the end of each chord – her only concession to white. Most people in the hall wore white; a sign of respect to the spirits being honoured here tonight. But the little girl wore a pink and white striped t-shirt over a frilled and faded red skirt. Perhaps the rules were different for children.

Every so often the girl would break off her candy negotiation, close her eyes and immerse herself absolutely un-self-consciously in the rhythm. She couldn’t have been more than seven or eight years old, but she flicked and rotated her skinny hips in a



manner way beyond her years, opening a window to the sensuality she would one day practice with more self-conscious skill.

She was not just pulsing with the beat, not just performing an obvious parody of what she must have seen her mother, and countless other women, do as part of their birthright. She had surrendered herself to it, utterly.

She was like the spinning women on the floor, dervishes whose long skirts flared out stiffened by motion and layers of white petticoats. One was decked out in ornate gold brocade, with rivers of gold chains and trinkets precious-seeming, even though they were probably made of painted plastic. She held a hand mirror, preening and spinning and reflecting and weaving, like water.

Facing them, and two tiers up, the young girl jiggled and swayed, gyrating to the pulse she had taken inside her, eyes closed, fist closed around a handful of the sweets that, when she opened her eyes and hand and looked down, had run into rivulets of colour that coalesced in the centre of her palm like a chocolaty stigmata. The girl's eyes danced as she shoved the congealed mess into her mouth, throwing a look of bliss and triumph at her small neighbour who had long ago finished her own handful.

Maddy felt her face crease into a smile, but when the girl child turned around suddenly she looked away – she had not earned this intimacy, but taken it without permission.

That was when she noticed that she herself was being watched.

He held her line of sight and did not falter in the rhythm he was beating out on a tall, carved wooden drum. There were about ten drummers in the drum pit, directly in front of the women's section. Grouped with their backs to the women and turned slightly towards one another, so that a nod or a glance could initiate a change in beat, they weaved their percussive spell over the *terreiro*.

Later, she would learn from Roberto that the incantation was anchored by the low throaty drums called *rums*, quickened by the smaller *rumpi* and *rumpilé*, lifted and penetrated by the high pegging, double-belled *agogos*. She didn't know those names yet. Now, she was just taken up by the beat.

The watcher's left hand palmed slow time, while in his right he flicked a stick that teased the drum skin. He was on the far side of the group, his head tilted to watch her.

He did not smile. He just looked. And played.  
She wasn't sure if he was even seeing her.  
Her own lips faltered midway into a tentative arc.  
He was nodding his head – to her, to the beat? -- swaying slightly with the  
rhythm, stroking, beating, nodding.  
She found herself swaying and nodding, too.  
The little girl in front of Maddy turned again to look at her, then looked back at  
the man.  
She elbowed her friend and said something Maddy couldn't hear. The friend  
turned to look.  
*Senhorita Magdalena?*

## Salvador, Bahia

### iii

At first she didn't register that the voice was calling her. She had been away so long, she had to get used all over again to hearing her full name – Mad-da-LE-na, with a silent 'g', the long emphasis on the third syllable, and a definitive stress on the last that made her feel like she was being underlined.

‘Senhorita Magdalena!’

The voice was more insistent now. It came from the edge of the stand, towards the door. Maddy thought she saw a swish of beckoning colour moving out into the night. She felt quite certain that she needed to follow it.

Outside, the clean air sharpened her senses. The full moon had risen now, casting a cool light on the sandy patch in front of the *terreiro*. Light spilled out through the open doors into the almost dark, glinting highlights on the metal trim of the cars parked street side, and the stall frames and silver dishes of the snack vendors at its edge. Piled up on a table next to the stalls was a blue pyramid of bottled Agua Viva.

Maddy felt suddenly, powerfully thirsty. She took a step towards the water but was arrested by a figure blocking the beam of light streaming from the open door. Silhouetted, he was edged in white, with the light shining through a soft floss of white hair. He looked ethereal, but the boom of his voice was decidedly earthy.

‘Senhorita Magdalena! We have been waiting for you!’

He stepped forward so the light caught his face – eyes creased with smile wrinkles, mouth framed by a close-cropped white beard – and extended a welcoming hand. Ernesto de Souza was an elder in the *Ile Axé Bencois*, as well as a poet, an academic and a personage around Salvador. She'd been expecting a bespectacled academic and alderman, not the seraph-in-training from 'It's a Wonderful Life'.

Ernesto waited while she quenched her thirst, making polite small talk about her trip. He was particularly interested in the volcano – he seemed to credit it with a decidedly mischievous personality.

Occasionally he cocked his head, and raised his hand to still their conversation. He was listening, he explained, for the rhythm that would signal his *orixa* – Oxalá. When the time came, he would need to dance.

‘We are pleased that you could be with us on this special occasion,’ he said, grasping both her hands between his. ‘This is a celebration of the *terreiro*’s ruling orixá, Xangô.’ *Shan-GOH*. ‘Perhaps you have already met him. He stands for justice but presides over volcanoes as well as lightning.’ His eyes, an extraordinary yellow-brown, seemed to dance with delight at his own joke. ‘Tomorrow you can see the gardens. José Carlos will show you everything. But for tonight...’ He took her elbow and guided her towards the door. ‘Please, you must come and sit with us inside.’

Unsure of the protocol, she followed him in past the stand reserved for men, feeling their curious eyes burning her back as she was guided to the intimate inner circle, where *terreiro* regulars and luminaries – those who had not yet been called to join in the dance – sat in relative comfort at the front of the hall, opposite the drummers.

She was welcomed warmly, a space made for her, a fold up chair found. Then she was mercifully ignored, left alone to orientate herself.

Everyone’s focus was on the roda floor, where women in their wide, Baiana-style skirts, their hair tied up in white kerchiefs, circled endlessly. They were all draped in long strands of beads, piled strand upon strand, colour upon colour, so that there seemed to be some kind of code in the patterns.

Maddy let herself be washed by the beat, lost in the colour, and thought about the gardens. Tomorrow. The *Ile Axé Bencois* was honoured to share its knowledge, Ernesto had said, citing the *terreiro*’s many community outreach programmes and educational initiatives. She had no doubt that there were limits to what they would share with strangers. There would be some plants that would be off limits. But she knew how to recognise what she was looking for.

The matter of actually taking seeds or plant material away – that had never arisen. While Kirk was working on the national permits, the most important permission, and the one that would be the hardest to get, would come from the *terreiro* itself. She would have to convince the powers that be that it was a good idea. And at this moment, those powers

were either whirling on the dance floor, possessed, or waiting to attend the newly entranced.

Maddy was starting to sense a pattern in the endless dance. Every now and again, one of the women would fall to the floor, be calmly caught up by one of the circling attendants, and taken through one of the doors in the back. They would come back in a little later, costumed to represent whichever orixá had taken residence within them. Then they would make their way randomly around the floor, eyes closed, guided by the beat, weaving in and out of the circle but never missing a step or colliding with any of the others. When they approached the audience, members of the crowd would lift their hands up, palms forward, as if to catch the orixá's energy.

There was a woman sitting on Ernesto's far side. She was nodding to the beat and chatting, every inch the middle class matron. One of the entranced women approached her. It occurred to Maddy that they could be neighbours, in the world outside the *roda*. They probably swapped recipes, or borrowed cans of condensed milk from each other to make crème caramel *pudim*. But at that moment, the woman slipped off her chair, kneeled down and kissed the ground at the feet of her deity.

The power of belief.

Maddy was gripped with a sudden panic. What if she were approached by one of the whirling, juddering possessed? Would she be expected to prostrate herself, to humbly accept the blessing of the incumbent *orixá*? Maddy prayed – as much as her allegiance to atheism allowed – that they would pass her by.

And they did. Perhaps even the entranced were mindful of her outsider status? She would try to keep her scepticism in check, but she was a scientist. Her mission here, ostensibly, was to share her knowledge of southern African medicinal herbs. Still, she already sensed how easily she might be sabotaged by her own need to belong.

Eight years old, in the middle of a line of other children shuffling towards the altar at the St Josephs school chapel, she had tipped back her head and opened her throat to accept the body of Christ, even though she was not officially sanctioned to do so. The wafer tasted a little bit like peanut butter, just as her new friend Olive had promised it would.

She hadn't done it for the dare. She did it so she wouldn't have to sit alone underneath the weeping saints, enduring the nudges and the giggles of the younger kids, and the judgement of the nuns and the teachers sitting at the very back of the church. She didn't fully understand the meaning of transgression, then. She just wanted to belong.

Now she was sitting through an entirely different kind of ceremony with a rigid smile, willing herself to be ignored. Not entirely trusting her ability to remain apart. After all, she needed to ingratiate herself with these people.

At one point she was handed a paper plate of food a lot more substantial than the Catholic wafer – or anything she had eaten for the last two days. There was rice and okra, swimming in sweet orange dendê oil and tasting of unfamiliar spices. It reminded her of the free plates of Hari Krishna food they used to give out at university. Simple, wholesome, and vibrating with something more than the sum of its ingredients.

She began to appreciate the attention that went into every aspect of the ceremony. While the colour and the pageantry went on, there were people in the background keeping everything working smoothly, so that focus of the audience could stay on the dance floor. The drums kept up their beat without pause, but her drummer was no longer part of the group, had been replaced by another. Most of the tourists had left by now too. The energy was a little more intimate, a little more intense.

There were many deities on the *roda* floor now. One was a man – or so she thought; it was hard to tell through the wig-like mask of long grass over his face. He seemed the most traditionally African of all the deities so far. Another man in a red skirted loincloth swung a double-bladed hand axe. When he passed in front of them Ernesto leaned in, elbowed her side and stage whispered, 'Xango!'

The one she noticed earlier, with the gold and the mirrors and the blissful expression on her face, was back too, eyes closed, mouth twitching with some kind of inner dialogue. She was not a young woman, but her body moved with the grace and suppleness of a goddess. Whoever usually lived inside that body had made way for something else.

'That is *Oxum*,' Ernesto pronounced it OSH-OON. 'She is goddess of sweet waters. Also of wealth and beauty – she is quite vain.' Now Maddy understood the

symbolism of the mirrors. ‘We celebrate her in rivers and streams. All over Salvador. You know the song?’ He begins to sing, ‘*E toda cidade é do Oxum...*’

The entire city is of Oxum. She had Gal Costa’s album at home. Had never made the connection.

Ernesto turned away to talk to the woman on his other side, seemingly unaware of the approaching *orixá*. Maddy felt her chest tighten as the swirling, whirling woman veered straight towards her. She was a blaze of yellow, a spinning vortex drawing energy – Maddy’s energy.

Maddy’s heart was a drum that wanted to leap out of her chest through her mouth. *Go away*. She thought. *Please go away*. She closed her eyes to shut out the sight of the woman, gripped the seat of her chair to stop from falling over.

*What if I die here?* She can’t remember the last time she feared death. She’d been courting it for so long. The blood clamoured against the sides of her veins. She imagined them clogged by the cholesterol in the dendê oil. Perhaps this is an extreme reaction to the food – perhaps she will die, poisoned and bloated like Elizabeth Bishop. *This is a panic attack*.

And then it was gone. Maddy released her grip on the chair, opened her eyes. The *orixá* had veered away. The floor, the lights, the rise of stands across the *barracão* hall, the drums, everyone around her carrying on, absolutely unaware of her panic.

Maddy looked for Oxum in the crowd of circling bodies, saw a glint of gold as a gap opened up. *Did you hear me?* The woman’s eyes opened, flashed as they looked straight at her, then rolled back, alarmingly white, into their sockets again.

Of course she didn’t *really* see that. She was tired, dizzy, disoriented – dehydrated! That was it. The long trip. The jet lag. The suspended transit limbo. She hasn’t been drinking enough water.

She drank a gallon back at the pousada, before she fell into a deep, dark, dreamless sleep.

## In Transit

[I]

13:50	13:50	BUENOS AIRES	TM63	ON TIME
14:15	14:15	FRANKFURT	LH5873	ON TIME
15:00	15:45	GUADALAJARA	MX439	DELAYED
16:20	16:20	NY JFK	AI796	ON TIME
16:45	17:25	LISBON	TP4036	DELAYED
17:10	17:10	SINGAPORE	SQ342	ON TIME
18:20	18:20	JOHANNESBURG	SA349	ON TIME

I add some extra sugar to what might be my last cafezinho on Brazilian soil until who knows when. The thought carves a lacuna somewhere deep in my centre.

It all feels so different now. *I* feel so different. One month, two moons, and a lifetime later. I don't understand a lot of what just happened. But I am changed.

So is the airport – it's returned to what passes as normal. Planes flying again, more or less on schedule, defying gravity, fate, and death wishes. As if all that engine-clogging volcano ash had never been.

I have a six-hour Sao Paulo layover. Given the choice, I would never spend that long in a shopping mall. But that's effectively what this is. Those calm lulls between places, the suspension of motion I used to love, have become casinos of consumerism. *Distraction is the only thing that consoles us for our miseries*, Blaise Pascal said four centuries ago. *And yet it is itself the greatest of our miseries*. What would the philosopher think of our modern day lack of contemplative space?

Then again, the last thing I want to do right now is think. I am trying consciously and continually *not* to think...

But when I focus on what's outside my head, all around me, my perceptions feel weirdly heightened. It's like I can detect currents in the air. I watch the barista fix a



cafezinho. Watch water being poured. *See* the water. *Feel* its flow. *Iron, earth, air, fire, water, leaf.* How could I not have noticed these elementals, in everything, in myself, before?

Get a grip.

The world is the same world. It just has a different dimension. I always knew it was there, without really seeing it.

And now there are the voices.

They're not 'get thee to the asylum' kind of voices. I'm not hearing Jesus or Jim Jones or Yosemite Sam. Not even Yemanjá, Oxossi or Xangô, although they've all been in my dreams, along with their hypnotic drum beats.

This voice in my head is urgent. It's me and it's not, it comes from within and from someplace else. And it's telling me -

*Go. Now.*

The swimming air feels crowded, makes my skin prickle with a kind of claustrophobia. I need to get out, get going, get away. I need to leave, NOW.

*Now.*

Down the coffee in one swift gulp. Heft backpack onto shoulder. Check passport, boarding pass, money, yellow fever certificate. Unopened letter. Adjust moonbag, precious cargo strapped close to my belly. Check the clock, again. Five-and-a-half more hours. Three-hundred-and-thirty more minutes before I'm out of here.

## Salvador, Bahia

### iv

The alchemy of Five Roses stirred strong, with one sugar; the potion to dispel any grief, worry or anxiety. As far as self-medication went, hers was a mild addiction.

They say you should only infuse green tea at 80 degrees – otherwise it burns the leaf. Regular Ceylon is more forgiving. You can boil it for hours, with cinnamon, cardamom and cloves, to make a good strong chai.

The water that gushed from the flask at the breakfast buffet of the *Lua Azul* left a scum at the top of the cup, which was too small. She had to go back again and again to get her proper wake-up quota of brew.

The breakfast balcony hung out over the haze of the harbour and city, already grown hot. Today she would return to the *Ile Axé Bencois*, meet José Carlos, the caretaker of the garden, and talk about plants.

But first, a visit to Pelourinho's Afro Brasileiro Museum. Last night it became clear that she was ill prepared for her mission. She had come armed with southern African traditional plant lore, to share with the people of the *terreiro*, to earn their trust. But their confidence, she was beginning to realise, might be rather more valuable, its price rather more personal, than that.

Sonia the receptionist had stopped her on her way through to breakfast. A lanky girl with an acne-scarred face and a figure made for samba, she gave Maddy a walking map of Pelourinho and marked the museum for her.

She'd also handed her a note, which the night porter forgot to give Maddy when she came in last night. She had missed a telephone call. *Desculpes*.

It was torn from a memo pad designed for the purpose. *Time: 20h50. Name: Gillermo Bellani. A telephone number in Manaus.*

Her father.

How had he tracked her here?

*Em.*

Of course.

She stuck the blue note under her breakfast plate, where it was soon smeared with passion fruit pulp. Now there was a plant that wasn't shy about advertising its seeds. Her grandmother had a crazy wild vine in her garden. She called them granadillas. The Brazilians called them *maracuja*. Their flowers like ladies twirling in wide white skirts flecked with purple, their green stamens like arms, outstretched. Not unlike the women she saw last night.

The vine had been flowering on her grandparents farm that fateful Christmas. She was six and her parents – unbeknownst to her – were trying to save their marriage. It was doomed anyway, it seems. The lightning bolt had only finished off what the burning of Sarah's studio had started. The immolation of grief.

And her father was the cause of it.

The Rothco Red was all that remained from the fire, and if it weren't for the small scorched corner, bottom right, you would never know what it had been through. The charcoal smudge looked to be part of the painting, but on close inspection you could see that it was not oil paint but singed canvas. Blackened in a way that seemed unintentional, even for an artist bent on confounding expectations.

The day Em told Maddy the truth, in front of that painting, Bishop, and Rothco, and Brazil had all come together in her head as an anguished wail – her silent Scream – as the frail edifice she had used to prop up her love for her father – her idealised, absent, inadequate father – finally crumbled. She started fighting with him soon after that, on that first trip back to Brazil.

The fights got worse with each subsequent visit. They pretended they were arguing points of principle – the dams and the food programmes he was convinced could alleviate world hunger, versus the centralising monoculture practices she felt were putting decision-making power in the hands of multinationals that either failed to see or didn't actually care that they were destroying the perfect, intricate balance the earth had spent millennia developing.

But ultimately, it came down to trust. And faith. She attacked his Catholicism, his very God. He had become devout again, thanks to his new wife. Pious and faithful. A little too late, she told him.

What to do about her father? Now that he knew she was there, she felt a new kind of pressure. A drop in her emotional barometer.

The lounge of the *Lua Azul* doubled as an informal gallery and internet café. Before she left she checked her email among the carved masks and elongated statues peering out between ferns. Nothing from Em. Maddy doubted she would feel the need to explain herself. And anyway, Maddy wasn't ready to engage with her. There was a brief mail from Kirk:

*Trust you arrived safely. Don't get distracted now, by Brazil's myriad seductions!  
Remember your mission. Our sponsors want results. Find us our seed!  
Live long and prosper. Over and out.*

And an even shorter one from Nick:

*I'm sorry, it was a shitty way to part. Hope you are having a good time. Can we talk when you get back? (When do you get back?) x N*

There was an attachment to the mail. A photograph of two furry creatures lying next to one another, with the heading 'Significant Otters'. It was supposed to be cute. Except, to her, one of the otters looked like it had been squashed flat. Significant road kill.

No mention of the volcano – although it had been headline news all over the world. He didn't ask how she had fared, stuck in transit. Had he even noticed? But then he always felt a world away, even when he was right there next to her. Or was it she, that was in perpetual transit?

She needed to walk.

She set off down the Rua do Carmo, a quiet residential street with a smattering of *pousadas* and a few clothing and curio stores, still shut, although the per kilo self service cafes were doing a brisk breakfast trade. The uneven cobblestones meant she had to watch her feet more than she wanted to, but when she rounded a corner and looked up she found herself in front of Roberto's music store. *Os Agogos* was closed, but as she peered through her reflection in the glass door at floor crowded with drums, her unease about her

father, and her churlish hurt about Nick's thoughtlessness, began to subside. The shop was crammed with everything from small gourd shakers to massive djembes that would dwarf someone of her small stature. On the walls, single-stringed, wooden instruments, hung like bows waiting to go into battle. She wondered when Roberto would be back from his trip. She made a mental note of the location. It would be nice to see a familiar face, even if a newly acquainted one.

It was not until she was at the entrance to the museum that she realised that habitual irritation with Kirk's Trekkie tone had masked a question. It had been dogging her all through the hilly Pelhourinho streets and finally coalesced: *sponsors*? What did Kirk mean by that? He had assured her that this was an independent institute initiative. She made a mental note to mail him later.

The museum was in an historic colonial manse. The ground floor was dedicated to African artefacts from Benin, the Niger and Angola, where the majority of the 3 million plus slaves brought to Bahia originated. Brazil was slow to abolish slavery, and by the time the trade officially ended in 1888, double the number of slaves had been brought here than to the United States of America.

She found the orixás at the top of a short flight of stairs. Here were the stories of candomblé, where the Yoruba legends from Africa's western bulge cloaked themselves in the accoutrements of Catholicism, and wove in some of the ways of the Amerindian Coboclo. Here was the spirit of Pelourinho.

There were charts, drawings and photographs for each deity – she counted 12 without taking a single step. The natural elements were well represented; there were orixás for water, for plants, for storms and rainbows, and also for steel and industry and war. A glass cabinet displayed doll sized figurines in vibrant regalia. For the first time she encountered Ossain, lord of magic potions, orixá of leaves, herbs and medicine. He was dressed in green (naturally). He wore a crown and carried a spear with a dove at its apex. 'See you later,' she promised him, and then looked around to make sure no one had witnessed her foolishness.

A set of wall posters that explained how candomblé had evolved, how the saints merged and converged with the orixás; Mary mother of God and Yemanjá of the Oceans,

with her many children and her massive breasts; Nossa Senhora de Conceição into Oxum, the vain and covetous goddess of sweet water and wealth.

Apparently there were purists who disagreed with this simplistic convergence, preferring to emphasise the Yoruba origins. But everyone seemed to respect the devilish trickster *Exu*, who hangs around at crossroads and flits between the material realm of mortals and that of spirit. Only *Exu* could travel between the various orixás, and report to the high god Olórun. Forget to placate him at the beginning of a ceremony and you risk paying the price. When offended, *Exu* makes mischief.

Maddy's final stop was a hall where each member of the candomblé pantheon rose from floor to ceiling in polished cedar wood, accented with copper, metal, shell and bead. She was alone with the figures. They were massive, sensuous, sure-cut; wood become sinew and skin, carved with exquisite skill into flowing robes and diaphanous cloth, feather and hair. She wanted to run her hands along the grooves, lean in close so that the heat of her breath would release the cedar sap, and perhaps something else. She couldn't remember when she had last felt this close to a work of art.

Or perhaps she could. When she was fifteen Maddy's art teacher gave the class an assignment: choose a painting, from any style or era that you feel best represents you. Maddy chose *The Scream*. Before the week was out the guidance counsellor had called Em in for a consultation, while Maddy waited on the bum-polished bench in the corridor outside. Em came out wearing a serious face, but gave Maddy a conspiratorial wink when the counsellor wasn't looking. She took her niece out for a celebratory latte afterward (adding a tot of Glenfiddich to hers). She raised her glass. 'To Munch, who was not afraid of the scars of life.'

His *Scream* was stolen, once, Em told her. When it was recovered, people wanted to restore it to its original state. But Munch knew this was an impossibility. 'You cannot undo what has been done,' Em said. 'The painting went out and had an adventure and come back marked. That was its true nature.'

For the first time, Maddy had a sense that there might be a place for her in the world.

After that, she spent long hours looking for her mother in the only painting that survived the fire, the only one of hers that remained, besides the few pieces snapped up

by small galleries that hung now in collector's homes. Maybe one day she could trace and find them all.

The Rothco Red was singed, but still vibrant. The burn mark at the corner seemed to complement its blood colour, its paint-frayed yellow borders. Somewhere inside or behind or beyond the red was a square of green. A reprieve. Like Rothko, Sarah wanted people to stand close to this painting, to enter into it, to really experience it. Perhaps this blazing red with its calm heart of green was the purest expression of her anguish, her anger, her life force ... Maddy would never really know. This is all she has left of her mother's art, its charred corner a foreshadowing of what would happen a few weeks later on an African mountaintop.

She cannot blame her father for the lightning. But what about the emotional devastation that preceded it?

Maddy's cheek was pressing hard into one of the carved panels. She stepped back and looked up at Yemanjá. The goddess surfed the waves on a fish, listening to the secrets of the sea in a shell pressed to her ear. She had a space carved in her belly where all the other orixás crowded around, waiting to be born.

Each Orixá had an animal companion, a familiar. River goddess Oxum had a small, flat-horned deer; there was a turtle with thunder god Xangô, whose swinging loin cloths were carved with axes, cogs and triangles; iron man Ogun had his fox; the rainbow weaver Oxumare an ox.

Maddy felt an affinity with the water deities, but found herself coming back again and again to Xangô. Last night at the ceremony she had learned that the *Ile Axé Bencois's* patron saint commanded lightning. But there was something else. It was in the double-bladed axe he wielded, like a tomahawk. He held his left arm raised above his head, and he seemed to be twirling ...

In a flash, she saw her mother.

She was silhouetted against large trees – the green trees of late summer, but fire had turned them the colours of autumn.

She remembered a cool carpet of lawn under her bare legs and people rushing around with water buckets and her father trying to connect a hose and her mother

standing unmoved, unmoving, watching as the annex to their vacation house – her artwork, everything in her outhouse studio – went up in the blaze.

Maddy gazed up at Xangô, polished wood towering toward the high ceiling, and saw her mother doing a victory dance, twirling like a Comanche, tomahawk in hand, flaying hair backlit.

The vision only took an instant – lightning fast – but it altered her mood entirely. For the rest of the day it floated at her periphery like a corona, or the afterburn on your eyeball after looking too long at a bright light.

Images from immediately after the blaze continued to resurface. The Navajo woven blanket put around Maddy as she was picked up — she can't remember by whom; the bowl of pale yellow custard placed in front of her in the cabin kitchen, the royal blue table edging, the smell – not of smoke, but of pine or sumac (relative of the poisonous cashew) and mosquito repellent. There was a tear in one of the window screens that let the bugs in, and the bed sheets smelled of naphthalene.

After that there were quiet nights in Aunty Em's New York apartment, waiting for her mother to finish resting and come back to get her. When Sarah finally came, she was bright and hopeful, excited about a trip home for Christmas. Back to Africa!

They could not know that the trip was to be her mother's last. That it would be a decade before Maddy would return to her 'home' in the jungle of Manaus. That Bill would not be given the chance to fulfil his promise that he would stop returning from trips with the traces of his other women washed off but the knowledge of them lingering around his eyes. The Drakensberg trip was supposed to be a reconciliation attempt. But all it did was let him off the hook.

He should have looked after Maddy, kept her close after her mother was gone. Even if he had made that promise, he couldn't have kept it, either. He just wasn't up for it.

And now, now that her father has repented, now that he has finally gotten over the womanising that drove her mother, if not to her death then to a foreshadowing of it, now that he is comfortably settled with the mild-mannered Lucia, and a monkey tethered to the porch, he wants a reconciliation. But all Maddy can feel, finally, is pure blazing anger.



## Salvador, Bahia

### v

Ernesto had set up the meeting with José Carlos at the *terreiro* for noon.

The *Ile Axé Bencois* was prosaic in the flat light of midday, without the shadowed possibilities of darkness.

Fernando's taxi dropped Maddy outside the main gate, leaving her to walk in past the guard and up the short driveway. The walk seemed to take forever, in the humid heat.

She recognised the *baracao* hall, scene of last night's festivities. What she had not seen, in the darkness, was the compound behind the *terreiro*'s public face. It was completely walled in and, for the moment, utterly quiet.

There was no obvious reception area in this warren of buildings. Some were spanking new, others were clearly very old, but still freshly painted and well maintained. One long building might once have been stables; behind it the tops of tall trees that she presumed bordered the gardens. She had heard that they were extensive, but she couldn't see how that could be, slap bang in the middle of the city like this, bordered by a busy main road on one side, and with houses and business crowded all around.

Maddy was not sure what she had expected, but there was no welcome of any kind. It was eerily silent. And not a soul in sight.

A shrill alarm bell sounded behind her. Maddy jumped, then felt a rush of relief as the bell's peal unleashed children's shouts. A schoolyard, and the ordinary, everyday joy of pupils escaping the classroom for morning break. As she felt the adrenaline subside she found herself laughing out loud.

As if on cue, the *terreiro* seemed to wake up. A woman came out of one of the buildings carrying a large aluminium urn, its electrical cord looped around her arm. She crossed the empty space and entered another building without giving Maddy a glance. Now Maddy noticed that one of the doors in the long, low building was open, inviting entry. As she approached, a young woman in a skirt – modestly long, but not flared,

Baiana-style – ducked out of it, carrying a small wooden bowl, and disappeared into the room adjacent.

The open room appeared to be a kind of shop, its long tables weighted down with the business end of *candomblé*. There were cellophane-packed herb teas, labelled with unfamiliar names. A few promotional books on the lineage and heritage of the *terreiro* and its *mãe-de-santo*, Mãe Gabriella. There were carved wooden *figas* – the small fist clutching its thumb that believers wore to ward off the evil eye. You found them in every market in Brazil. Her father once brought her one as a gift, carved out of semi-precious green stone, before he rediscovered his piety.

Mostly there were beads. Separated by colour, they were coiled in heaps, piled in bowls; they flowed down the walls in translucent streams of turquoise and amber yellow, blue, white and green. Maddy already knew that yellow was for *Oxum*. White seemed to be for everyone. She wondered about the red and the black, but her hand was drawn to the clear turquoise. Turquoise for Yemanjá, queen of the sea and mother of all.

‘*Con licença.*’

The woman stood in the doorway, watching her, hands on hips. She was all hair – masses of coils ready to spring loose from where they were tethered at the nape of her neck – and her *café-con-leite* skin was dotted with freckles. Her face was broad and open, but her expression was guarded. ‘You like that one?’ she asked, in Portuguese. Maddy put the beads down.

‘I’m looking for José Carlos. I’m supposed to meet him here.’

The woman didn’t move, her expression didn’t change, but her silent scrutiny went on a little too long. Maddy wondered if she had transgressed some code. ‘I’m Maddy,’ she stepped forward, holding out her hand. ‘Senhor Ernesto said I should come today?’

‘Luisa,’ the woman said, taking her hand reluctantly, as if she was not sure what to do with it. ‘*Prazer.*’ But she said it as if it were anything but a pleasure to meet her. She was pricklier than a saguaro. Still, even cactuses flower at least once a year. Perhaps, like the *Carnegiea gigantea*, Luisa only bloomed at night?

Luisa continued to stare at her, then nodded as if she were listening to something Maddy couldn’t hear. Her thoughts, perhaps? Ridiculous. That was just the kind of

jiggery-pokery people play when they are trying to seem magical and mysterious. When really they are nothing more than rude.

‘The *mão-de-ofá*. He is in the garden,’ Luisa offered, on cue.

Ernesto had told her last night that the *mão-de-ofá* meant ‘hand of the herbs’. Besides knowing which should be harvested for what medicinal or ritualistic purposes and when, the ‘hand’ held the knowledge of the *terreiro*’s signature herbs, the kind known only to its inner circle. Was *Newbouldia* one of theirs?

‘Can you show me where?’

‘First you will meet *Mãe*. Then I can take you.’ Luisa slipped out, and Maddy heard voices from next door. Then Luisa was back. ‘*Mãe* Gabriella says you can come.’

The woman must have seen her looking down at her frayed cargo pants – force of habit, wearing khaki bush pants, with lots of pockets for samples – and a t-shirt. She had dressed for the field, not for the cloister.

‘It is okay,’ Luisa said. For the first time she smiled. The effect was extraordinary. Luisa’s cheeks dimpled and her eyes shone. Maddy had never seen a face go from fierce to captivating so quickly.

Maddy followed her to the adjacent room, where the *mãe-de-santo*, high priestess and head of the *terreiro*, received visitors.

The old woman sat in a wide wicker chair, high backed like a throne despite patches of frayed and broken cane. The proportions of the chair made her appear even tinier than she was, but there was nothing small about her presence. Even though her eyes were blue-grey and rheumy with age, her hair almost as white as the headscarf tied over it, she exuded a gracious power. Around her neck she wore every bead in the colour box, long strands running over one shoulder, crossing in front and looping down under her opposite arm.

Unsure of the protocol, Maddy crouched into a bow curtsey, like a deferent Japanese acolyte.

‘Welcome daughter,’ the *mãe-de-santo* said, and nodded to a nearby chair. ‘Sit, please.’ She watched Maddy closely as she settled herself. ‘You are from Africa.’

It was as much a statement as a question. Through her surprise, Maddy reminded herself that this information was common knowledge, not gleaned from mysterious sources.

‘I am.’

‘But you are not black.’

‘No.’ She didn’t think an explanation of South Africa’s racial complexities was required here – Brazil’s colour-coding was at least as complex, if perhaps less fraught. Still, she felt it safer to play on her African connection than her American one.

‘You were born in Africa?’

Maddy told the *mãe-de-santo* that she had, in fact, been born in Brazil. The first memory she has is of Amazon green.

‘*Catolico?*’

No, she wanted to tell her, I’m an atheist. Einstein called himself a ‘deeply religious non-believer’. That had always appealed to her. She certainly had enough Catholicism to play the part, what with Bella and her icons and Maddy’s rushed communion. Mãe Gabriela continued to watch her, without expression, as Maddy struggled to find the right line to take. Then she remembered a hidden ace. ‘My mother was born in Africa.’

Mãe Gabriella nodded as if to say, *finally*.

When she spoke, it was so softly that Maddy had to lean forward to hear, her mind scrambling to translate the Portuguese. *Tambem morreu la*. She died there too. *Sinto muito*. I am sorry.

Mãe Gabriella started speaking, more rapidly. Maddy heard something about Xangô, the god who threw thunderbolts and lightning. Her thoughts began to spin. Electricity prickled her extremities. She felt her blood slow, her head filled with cotton wool.

Mãe Gabriella was muttering down into her hands, clasped in her lap.

*And Maddy was small again, and the green grass was bending under purple clouds. She heard thunder, she smelt sulphur, and her peripheral vision was tinged with blue.*

Then it was over. Mãe Gabriella thanked Maddy for her visit, and told her to come back for a cleansing ritual when she was ready. Then Maddy was out in the yellow sunshine, following Luisa through the compound, coming back to herself through fog and static.

She hadn't had a chance to tell Mãe Gabriella why she was here – although she sensed that the mãe-de-santo already knew. This was the woman she would have to convince to let her take the seeds, should she find any. Not an auspicious beginning. Unless that was exactly the way they wanted it? Mess with her head, let her know who was really in charge here?

Then again, maybe she had misheard the part about her mother? After all, Xangô was the patron of this *terreiro*. Wasn't it natural that the Mãe would offer a prayer to him, whenever someone came to pay respects?

'Let's go?' Luisa was peering at her. Maddy was stopped in the middle of the square, staring at the ground.

Suggestibility, that was it. This whole thing just had her a little bit spooked. She would think about what had just happened later. Now, she needed to map the terrain, remember what she was here for. Play the modern-day Mata Hari, even if it meant selling off a bit of her non-believing soul for the good of the planet. Biodiversity was her agency, and her cause.

The real magic was the garden itself. Behind the compound's last outbuildings the ground tumbled into green space that seemed to go on forever. A low, stone wall demarcated the beginning of the garden, which dropped vertically down a steep hillside. The green Maddy had seen before, from the *terreiro* entrance, was the tips of the massive trees that had their roots way down below in this verdant vortex. Over the treetops she could see the city high-rises, the heat of steel and concrete seeming to float towards her over the green. It would be so much cooler down there.

Luisa stopped at a waist-high wrought iron gate, its bars twisted into shapes – leaves, spears, tridents, doves and axes – and called out.

'Zé!'

'*Falou!*' the muffled reply drifted up from below.

Luisa swung open the gate and stepped back, pointing Maddy down the rough concrete steps that dropped into the trees. Then she turned quickly and left.

Three steps later and Maddy was in another world. The perimeter was held by a few buttressed *ficus* trees, with wide white ribbons tied around their trunks. She walked on and down through towering Bahian myrtles and fat-fruited jaca trees (she knew they originally came from the Far East, but were so common here they were practically a national institution). There were white jacarandas and trees laden with cacau fruit, mangos and avocados mingled with Atlantic rainforest trees that Maddy didn't recognise. She tilted her head back and looked up into the canopy for just a moment, allowing herself to savour the feeling, breathing in the ozone, growing dizzy with green.

Bahia's rainforests were floristically unique and spectacularly diverse. Half the plants here grew nowhere else, and the other half had roots in Africa. She peered into the canopy, into the tangle of lianas, and counted off the eight out of ten trees that, statistically, would host ethereal epiphytes.

Here, at last, was Bishop's first idealisation –

- *monster ferns*  
*in silver-gray relief,*  
*and flowers, too, like giant water lilies*  
*up in the air – up, rather, in the leaves –*  
*purple, yellow, two yellows, pink,*  
*rust red and greenish white;*  
*solid but airy; fresh as if just finished*  
*and taken off the frame.*

When she reached the forest floor the terrain flattened out. There was no obvious order here. Herbs and grasses grew together, seemingly haphazard, but as she moved forward she began to make out rough patches bordered by striated bamboo. Tendrils of bottle gourd snaked among castor beans, and around tall sprays of mist-grey *Artemisia*, that most witchy of healing herbs (she knew of hundreds of subspecies, but this one looked almost identical to the African native plant). There was a morning-glory type

flower curling around the trunks of juvenile kola nut trees. Flat tobacco leaves vied for space with spreading *plectranthus*, and the jasmine-like *Hedychium coronarium* she knew well from its continent of old-world origin.

She saw no sign of *Newbouldia mundii*. Or the mysterious ‘hand of the herbs’.

She could hear him though, by the rhythmic thwack of blade on leaf. The sound drew her forward until he was suddenly there, in a clearing, with his back to her, hacking at a tall stand of speared *Dracaena fragrans*. His pale shorts were over-washed and of an indiscriminate colour. He wore a white, sweat-marked vest, and his feet splayed sideways out of plastic slops as he braced himself for each swing of the blade.

She paused on the edge of the clearing, enjoying the moment before he knew she was there, before her work had to start in earnest. Watched him hack at the plant, caught up in the rhythm he was creating, each swing rippling through his shoulder muscles, until his blade snagged on the thick stem and in the pause he registered her presence. When he turned to greet her she found herself looking into the eyes that had caught and held her at the side of the *roda* that first night.

If he recognised her, he didn’t show it. With careful deliberation he laid down his blade, lifted the hem of his t-shirt to wipe the sweat from his eyes and forehead. His belly was banded by a thin braid of woven grass, a shade lighter than the taut brown of his torso. She was still staring at it when he lowered his t-shirt, and said, ‘Thursday.’

*Quinta feira*. So it was. So what? All she could do was concur. ‘*Sim*.’

He gathered up the leaf spears he had just chopped.

‘This is *peregun*,’ he said. ‘Herb of Oxossi, and also of Ossain, who is the orixá of leaves, protector of the forest.’ As he handed them to her, she caught the clean, peppery smell of his sweat.

She took the leaves, rigid and succulent dark green, lightly striped along their length with lighter green. ‘And Oxossi is the hunter, isn’t he?’ She was showing off, but it worked. He smiled.

‘Thursday is the day of the forest. It is the day of Ossâim, and of Oxossi. You have arrived on an auspicious day.’ He stood close enough to her to run his hand along one of the leaves. ‘*Peregun* in the home keeps away bad spirits.’

Was he giving her the leaves for her own protection, or for his?

‘Thank you.’ She extended her hand. ‘Magdalena.’

‘And I am José Carlos,’ he said, ignoring her hand but leaning in for the conventional *beijinhos*, one on each cheek, instead. ‘My friends call me Zé.’

University of Cape Town



## Salvador, Bahia

### vi

Ernesto's veranda floated in a rare patch of Bahian rainforest high over the Atlantic. At home the Atlantic coast faced sunset; this one faced sunrise. And moon rise – it would be full tonight, but had not yet made its first appearance on the horizon.

Maddy was disappointed to discover that Zé would not be coming to dinner. It would be three days – three slow days – before she could meet him in the garden again on Monday. What to do with herself during that time? Without Zé, there was no access to the garden. Without access, there was no chance of finding the seed.

Their first meeting had been frustratingly brief. He didn't have time to take her around the garden that day. He had commitments most afternoons, he said. Better to meet in the mornings.

'All things in their time,' Ernesto refilled her shot glass with expensive cachaça and soothed her eagerness to get back into the garden. 'We all have our responsibilities.' It was rude of her to press, she realised. She had only meant to praise the abundance in the garden – and thank Ernesto for his introduction to it. But cachaça made her tongue reckless, and her frustration licked out.

It was an expensive brand of firewater, and they drank straight up, not mashed with lime, sugar and ice, street-style. This was her second night here and she still hadn't had a caipirinha. She would rectify that tomorrow.

Ernesto's house was a rambling Portuguese colonial style manse, with white stucco, dark carved woods, and calico roof tiles. All along the length of the balcony fringed white hammocks floated between tropical plants. The air was thick and warm.

At one end of the balcony there was a toucan in a large cage, grooming his feathers with an outrageous multicoloured beak that seemed to glow in the fading light. Maddy walked over and peered at him through the metal bars.

Elizabeth Bishop was gifted a toucan when she first moved in with Lota, to a house in the cool hills of Petropolis, above Rio. She called him 'Sammy', after Uncle Sam, because his colours were red and blue. When the bird slept, Elizabeth wrote a

friend, it lifted up its tail and curled under its arm ‘so that it looked like an inverted comma.’ Maddy wondered when this one would retire for the night; she’d like to see that for herself. She plucked at his cage, making vague clucking noises. The bird stopped his prodigious prodding, stared at her balefully for a moment, and resumed his grooming.

The stars were just beginning to show themselves, and Maddy looked in vain for the Southern Cross and its pointers. She liked to draw a sight line between them and down to the horizon, finding due south. If she faced the pole, she thought, then shifted her body 45 degrees to the left, there would be nothing but blue space and ocean between her and Nick’s house. It would be after midnight, where he was. She wondered if he might be having a nightcap out on his balcony, what he would be seeing as he stared out over the sea. Who he might be with.

‘*Saudades* for home?’ Ernesto was at her elbow with a refill. Without the cut of lime, the cachaça’s sweet petroleum whiff was even more potent. She felt its warmth begin to spread through her body.

‘No. I’m very happy to be here.’ As she said it, it felt true.

‘And we are honoured to have you visit us.’ He raised his glass to her. ‘Have you met Eduardo?’ The young man who stepped up offered his hand and a shy smile. Eduardo had a head of tight curls, round wire-rimmed glasses that made his eyes seem much smaller than they were, and a staggering knowledge of contemporary Brazilian music. He was involved in a project to map the influence of Hip Hop on Salvador’s youth. They hit it off immediately. He wanted to practise speaking English, and asked her to call him ‘Ed’ – but pronounced it ‘Edge’. Which sparked a conversation about U2 and an impressively realistic air guitar display.

The crowd around Ernesto’s dinner table was lively and urbane – besides Edge there was a lawyer, a photographer, and an academic – Maddy couldn’t figure out quite what it was that she did, other than that she had been a colleague of Ernesto’s at the Federal University of Bahia, before he retired. All of them, it seemed, had some connection with the *terreiro*. Some were introduced to it as children and had never questioned its centrality in their life. Others had found their way there through circumstance or need.

Maddy told someone she was struck by how the *terreiro* served to integrate so many layers of Bahian society. ‘There is still a lot of prejudice against candomblé in middle class society,’ said the lawyer, Teresa. ‘From the days when it was a force for uniting the slave underclass.’ She was thin and intense and fired off words with staccato rapidity. ‘Of course the African slaves and their descendants played up to that fear. When you’ve been stripped of all ostensible power, you find other ways to exercise it. The Portuguese slave owners were terrified of black magic.’

‘And what are they scared of now?’

‘The ones who reject candomblé?’ Teresa stared into her wineglass as if searching for bourgeois tendencies, swirling the claret with such vigour that Maddy expected it to slosh out over the side. By some sleight of physics, it stayed in the glass. ‘Chaos. A disruption to their sense of order.’

‘That order is a fallacy anyway.’ Ernesto’s remark elicited some knowing glances around the table. Maddy would have liked to offer that there is no randomness in the universe, but a rather elegant order behind everything. But she sensed that Ernesto was talking about local political machinations, of which she knew less than nothing.

‘They cling to the notion of order with both their hands, nonetheless.’ Teresa put the wine glass down to shake thin fists in front of her, as if she were conducting a symphony without batons. ‘It stops them from acknowledging or addressing the real problem, which is the systematic exclusion of the poor from culture and full citizenship.’ She dropped her fist into her lap and stared at them, as if wondering how they got up into the air in the first place.

‘An exclusion that our practice serves to address,’ Clara’s soothing voice contrasted the ideas it expressed, ‘by removing itself from the periphery that is a construct of the very centre that defines itself against it.’ Clara turned to Maddy and added, with unbaked directness, ‘It is not the unknown they fear. It is their fear itself.’

Wine after cachaça seemed to have loosened Maddy’s thoughts. She found herself pondering chaos, and its place in her personal science, while remarks flew across the table, over the highly polished dark wood, lace doilies, crystal and silverware that looked as if they’d been passed down through generations of the de Souza family. The founding de Souzas stared down from the wall, their high collars and dour expressions a Bahian

version of American Gothic. Maddy wondered how Ernesto's ancestors dealt with their fear of the chaos lurking in their slave's quarters. Perhaps miscegenation was one way of taming it. Every person here carried the genes of slaves and colonisers and indigenous natives in them, to one degree or another. A miraculous selection of random mutations Darwin would have been fascinated with.

Darwin stopped believing in miracles. Perhaps Einstein, Eddington, and Hawking never did. But they all left a loophole to accommodate phenomena that were still outside of the realm of human understanding. They would be the first to admit that it is only natural – or only human – to put our own face on unknowables, the better to fit them into some kind of narrative. The wonders of the universe anthropomorphised into the gods and goddesses of the ancient Greeks – or the orixás around this table. Maddy had no doubt that some of the dinner guests would be wearing beads under their elegant blouses, or around wrists cuffed by cotton shirts. 'Life would be stunted and narrowed,' Eddington said, 'if we were only to use science to understand mysticism.'

No one had asked her about her beliefs, let alone her work, or what it was that she hoped to achieve here. She felt, rather, that she was being presented with a pageant, about who and what these people were. Or as they would like her to see them.

There was nothing random, let alone chaotic, about it. Everything had been carefully arranged and beautifully presented. The spectacle orchestrated with care and attention and grace, with good manners and proper regard for ceremony and protocol. The assemblage here represented music and culture, art and legal structure, letters and ideas – the intellectual face of a deeply superstitious sect.

And Ernesto was the perfect host.

He had seated her next to Alessandra, the photographer, an ample woman with boudoir eyes and an armful of silver who had just published a book on the photographs of Pierre Verger. She worked at the institute that was now run out of his old house in a Salvador favela. She was telling Maddy how the French anthropologist became fascinated with candomblé in the 1950s and travelled to West Africa to document the original Yoruba stories that lived on in candomblé. 'He did a lot of work together with Carybé,' she said, bracelets jangling as she indicated a series of pen and ink drawings along Ernesto's dining room wall.

‘I saw his carvings today – at the museum,’ Maddy told her. ‘They are wonderfully...alive.’ She remembers the cedar scent, wood made diaphanous.

‘*Que maravilhosa!*,’ Alessandra clapped her hands with genuine delight. ‘Uncle, did you hear?’

‘Together with Jorge Amado,’ Ernesto said, ‘Carybé and Verger are the holy trinity of culture in Salvador.’

There was a rush of advice about books and music she must get, restaurants and bars and street performances she absolutely could not miss.

Clara had left the table, but now her voice came in from outside, high with excitement. ‘Come out to the balcony,’ she called them. ‘*Rapido!*’

Scraping back their chairs and gathering drinks, the rest of the party came out just in time to see the moon rising, full bellied, over the horizon. Ernesto proposed that they take their coffee in the moonlight.

Maddy found herself gravitating towards the birdcage again. The toucan was still awake, ruffled by the cool breeze. Maddy herself was still warm with bonhomie. Her mission didn’t feel so clandestine. They could all benefit if she found *Newbouldia mundii*. Zé would be her closest ally. But here was Ernesto too, offering to give her Salvador on a silver platter – he’d actually used those words a little earlier. The tray he held towards her now was crowded with tiny coffees. ‘I was just admiring your bird,’ Maddy told him. The toucan’s earlier grooming seemed to have had very little effect. He was looking decidedly disgruntled.

‘Ah, Lupe!’ he said. ‘My daughter named him. After the bird on the cereal box. He is a real gentleman.’ He put the tray on a nearby table and inserted a crooked finger between the bars of the cage. The bird hopped over and arched his neck, cat like, to rub his ear on the old man’s knuckle.

The transcontinental power of the brand. She hadn’t seen a Brazilian Froot Loops commercial, but the bird in the ad of her childhood was voiced by Mel Blanc – as were Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Tweety Bird and just about every other Loony Tunes character. This particular Lupe hadn’t uttered a sound all evening.

She told Ernesto about Bishop’s blue bird, his skin the colour of blueberries. As if he had blue jeans on under the feathers, she’d said.

‘Ah, the American poet,’ he said. ‘She loved everything about Brazil. Of course there are things that, even with the best of intentions, foreigners cannot understand.’ The bird shifted to offer the other side of his neck, Ernesto obliged by twisting his finger around to hook the other way. ‘She killed that bird, you know.’

He withdrew his hand and the bird retreated to his earlier perch, shaking himself out. ‘She was not to know. She took the advice of someone she trusted and cleaned him with a potent insecticide. Found him dead in his cage the next morning.’ He picked up his coffee cup. ‘Ignorance can be a dangerous thing, when you are in unfamiliar territory.’ He drained the dregs and set the cup carefully down on the tray. ‘Such a terrible waste.’

His words echoed in her head through the long taxi ride back to her pousada. The more they played there, the more they felt like some kind of warning, cutting a cold river through the warm flow of the evening.

## Salvador, Bahia

### vi

In the doldrum days that followed, Maddy discovered that there were two ways down from Pelourinho to the lower city; the long, winding road, or the short sharp drop.

She spiralled her way through the *bairro*'s small streets, through the confluence at the Largo do Pelourinho and its cake-blue Igreja da Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos, managing to duck the touts who waited on its steps to pounce with multicoloured *fitas* ribbons, blessed by Nosso Senhor de Bonfim (or at least, machine-inked with his name). They would grab the wrist of an unsuspecting tourist and tie it with a torrent of words; by the time the knot was fastened the deal was done. Who could then refuse to part with a handful of grubby *reis*? Untying the bond with only one hand was impossible. And why risk inviting the wrath of the saint, or lessen the chances for the good fortune that wearing the ribbon was supposed to bring?

So far she'd avoided being tagged, partly by scowling at anyone who approached her bearing ribbons, and partly by speaking Portuguese well enough to pass as a local. She could pick out new tourists by the number of fresh bands on their wrists – ribbons they would cut off with nail scissors in their bathrooms back home, on the morning they returned to work. Seasoned travellers and career itinerants wore only one or two *fitas*, softened by time, salt, sea and showers, and fated to fall off at the proper moment, when their wish was ready to be granted.

She took the Elevador Lacerda direct from the Praça da Sé down to the small harbour and market below. Somewhere between a subway and an elevator, the elegant art-deco box was a claustrophobe's nightmare. Even so, scores of people crammed into it to drop the seventy metres from cliff face to street level in 15 seconds.

She looked into dozens of churches – each more gilded and ornate than the next, but none more so than the Igreja do Carno, where a life-sized Jesus lay in state in a glass casket, waiting to be resurrected and carted around the city on festival days. A slave named Franciso Xavier das Chagas carved him in 1730, crushing 2000 rubies in whale oil to get just the right glisten for the blood that poured from the stigmata on the statue's hands and feet. The image of the slave, crouched and crushing to create verisimilitude for

something he didn't believe in, dogged Maddy as she walked the streets. Was he, at the end of his long labour, at all convinced? Converted?

As she wandered the streets where Jorge Amado's *Dona Flor* was stalked by the capricious spirit of her dead husband, it became obvious that, here, the impish would always win over the staid and respectable. Maddy had always sympathised a little with Dona Flor's second husband, the stiff-collared chemist, unaware that his marital bed was being shared with a ghost. But treading Pelourinho's old stones, breathing in sea breezes and a perfume she couldn't identify, Maddy found herself rooting instead for the Dionysian cuckold spirit of Flor's first love.

She re-read the book.

She bought a pair of havaianas, patterned with black and white Ipanema undulations that she imagined would give her gait a particular kind of swirl, as if 'Girl From Ipanema' were playing under her as she walked. She'd always associated the rubbery plack – plack – plack of havaianas walking – sometimes with a swish or a grating drag thrown in for percussive variation – with indolence. The indolence of beach vacations, or of labour in hot climes. Or a total rebellion against – or nonchalance in the face of – labour of any sort whatsoever. It was the sound of warm days and wandering ways.

She revisited *Os Agogos*. Roberto was there this time, his dreads splaying out of a neon yellow hair tie.

'You arrived.'

'You've been closed.'

He nodded, unapologetic. 'Wednesday night was a late one.' He glanced over at a customer who was thumping inexpertly on a small drum. 'Tonight we play on the *Igreja do Passo* steps. Come.'

She told him she'd already agreed to meet Edge and Alessandra on the steps later. She would see him there.

She had to pass the *Passo* steps on the way back to the *Lua Azul*. They lead up to the weathered old gothic-gabled church, bordered by buildings on two sides to form a natural amphitheatre. The steep steps also lead to her road, but, feeling a sudden crush of



jetlag, she opted to take the longer, gentler route; a narrow cobbled lane that sloped gently up to join it a few blocks on.

The warren of side streets exuded the smells of centuries past, as well as of dinners to come. Tonight's menu: chicken and beans, spices and greens, laced with diesel fumes from the mopeds spluttering up the hill.

At the steepest section of the hill, Maddy fell into step with a woman walking in front of her, her rubber shoes beating a hypnotic thwack, thwack, thwack. The woman held a small child by the hand, a boy whose own *havaianas* scraped and slapped double time as he hurried to keep up. Their syncopation was interrupted when the woman veered suddenly and tugged the child to the other side of the street.

Maddy was almost on top of the pile of feather and bones before she noticed the circle of red and black candles around it. Not a road kill, but an offering. Something in a cup. *Blood?* Oh superstitious mind – it was probably cachaça. Sleepiness had increased her suggestibility. But she followed the example of the woman ahead of her and hurriedly crossed the road.

The image of the offering lingered over her left shoulder.

Her small room was frigid from air conditioning – someone must have put it on while she was out. Didn't they know about global warming? She switched it off and opened the doors onto the balcony.

She was beginning to recognise a pattern to the afternoons. Clouds muttering as they darkened the sky. She should be on high alert for lightning. But it was too darn hot.

She left the door open, curtains billowing as she lay down on the bed and stared at the only piece of artwork in the room, a small block-mounted acrylic in the naïf style she had seen replicated in every art shop in the city.

Two elongated figures drawn in sharp black lines, long arms twisting around and through one another. One looks out – faceless, impassive– the other dances around her. Behind them a tall red drum. The figures stretched like taffy-pulls, the arcs of their arms leaving trails through the picture, tracing blocks of colour, imprinting the air with their obvious desire. There were tiny cracks in the paint that divided the surface.

She looked at the picture for a long time, at the long limbs making waves through canvas and light, until the molecules began to move and blur. From a base in Maddy's

belly vines began growing, reaching up and tangling around her rib cage, finding her heart, the vine tips probing and dividing and covering her with thick green arms, twining and budding and blossoming to fill her until she was choked full, couldn't breathe, gasped in air and sat up in bed, still and alone.

Gloaming. Across the room she could barely make out the picture. The two figures, perfectly still, black tendril arms frozen. And only one small leaf-sized patch of green between them.

Two hours later she sat on grey stone steps as cold as tombstones, with a caipirinha in a plastic cup balanced between knees drawn up to accommodate the people packed in all around her. She was pounding the lime and sugar down with a short straw in beat with the music, jazzy guitar and saxophone, underpinned by the Afro-Brazilian groove.

Roberto gyrated wildly on the stage at the bottom of the steps, dreads bouncing as he beat his band members and the crowd into a frenzy with his drum.

The ample man on stage named Gerônimo was their musical host, a local legend who hosted these free concerts every week. Roberto's band was tonight's guest attraction. Edge told her it was Geronimo who composed *É d'Oxum* – the unofficial anthem of Salvador. The song that had been connecting her to Salvador for years, without her even realising its significance.

Edge had been lecturing her about Bossa Nova beats – although the act on stage was more samba-reggae – drilling her with hi-hat and ostinato techniques and paradiddle left eighth notes, until Alessandra nudged him in the ribs and told him to give Maddy a break.

Someone bought another round of caipirinhas.

Edge and Alessandra had to leave before the concert was finished – their infant daughter was waiting for them at home with Ale's mother. They offered to see Maddy home, but she assured them that she would find her own way – it wasn't far at all. And she was having way too much fun.

And then, with the inevitability of the sea retreating at low tide, it came to an end. After the music's last crescendo people began melting away, taking their warmth and their candles with them. Maddy joined the cluster around the bandstand to congratulate

Roberto. He introduced her to his band mates, and to Gerônimo, who was full of burly bonhomie. They invited her to join them for a few drinks. She hesitated only a moment. She was so close to home, and the heart of Pelourinho was in the other direction. Plus, her second wind was fading fast.

‘Next time,’ she told him, and waved him off as he and his band mates lugged their gear to a waiting van.

She decided to take the steps, the shorter route home. Half way up, she began to regret her decision.

Now that the crowds had gone the light from the tall wrought iron lamps seemed dimmer, as if the crush of bodies had somehow amplified and refracted it. Now it fell in lonely circles, leaving long spaces in between. She counted the number of steps from light edge to light edge – seven. She looked back down to the dismantled stage area—perhaps she could still catch them? But Gerônimo and Roberto and their gear were gone. There were just a few clusters of people left, strangers.

She was suddenly mindful of crime warnings. A woman. Alone. After dark. The *pousada* might not be far, but distance means nothing. Time telescopes. A lot can happen in an instant.

If she had gone back to town with the others she could have taken a taxi to her doorstep. She squared her shoulders and shrugged off negative thoughts – the idea that energy follows thought being one of the quasi-quantum spiritual ideas that fit into her science’s ‘don’t know’ category.

She remembered the pile of feathers and bone, ringed by red candles.

At the top of the steps, in the shadowy lee of the low wrought iron gate of the church, three young men had formed an impromptu *roda*. Their capoeira moves were clumsy and aggressive, a parody of the reverent fight-dance which white-clad acolytes practiced all over the city. These boy-men were not accompanied by traditional songs incanted in unison with a berimbau. Their look was more gangsta-rap, baggy pants and trainers, plastic bangles and metal chains. If she imagined them a backbeat it would be the favela-flavoured hip hop that Edge had been telling her about. She tried to make herself inconspicuous.

One of them kicked out high towards the other's head, his neon trainers flashing an intense apple green. The other ducked and jibbed, parried with a few quick boxing feints. A third one leaned with his arms crossed against the fence. Lean and dangerous and looking straight at her. He said something quietly to his mates and they stopped their horsing and fell in next to him.

She was almost level with them now. Why was she, so hiking fit, out of breath already? Jetlag and caipirinhas? She was keenly aware of her disadvantage.

The one with the trainers said something to the other two, and they laughed without looking away. She didn't see the signal, but she saw its effect; as one the three congealed and began to advance.

Maddy was at the top of the stairs. If she turned down her road she would have her back to them. She had to face them. With the drop of stairs behind her.

They split up and surrounded her. One stood directly in front of her, the other two either side. Green shoes resumed his battle rolls and feints, left to right, like a cobra sway.

*Quer dançar, garota?*

*Wanna dance?*

Then suddenly he fell back, his face twisting into annoyance. She felt a presence behind her, enveloping her without touching her.

Without a word to the young men Zé took her arm and steered her back down the steps. She heard the hoick and splatter of spit hitting the stones behind them.

At the bottom of the steps Zé dropped her arm and climbed onto a motorbike, motioning for her to climb on the back. He still had not spoken.

She put her hands lightly around his waist, felt the cord underneath his t-shirt. As he gunned up the hill she had to lean into his back and hold on tighter. And sheepish as she felt for being rescued in this way, she couldn't help smiling into his collar. It felt so good to hold a man.

There was no chance to speak over the engine on the short road home. And he didn't invite chit-chat when they reached the arched doorway of the *Lua Azul*.

'I'm sorry.' She started to thank him but he stopped her.

You must take better care.'

'I know.'

‘I might not be there next time.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘How did you...’

‘It’s lucky I was at the concert. Lucky I saw you there. And that I came back to check.’ He gunned the motor. ‘See you tomorrow,’ he said.

She stood in the street listening until the splutter of his engine had entirely disappeared.

University of Cape Town

## In Transit

### [II]

What is it with airports and greenery? There is not a living plant anywhere. In transit through Singapore in search of fresh air I once stepped out into a garden of sunflowers on an observation deck. From inside, the yellow heads swaying in the breeze of jet exhausts looked so enticing. Turned out it was being used as a smoking area, the sunflower roots all tangled up in Marlborough and Stuyvesant stubs. Unlucky strike. And not a bee in sight.

Right now I'd welcome any bit of green, no matter how distressed. If I close my eyes, my mind fills with forest. A certain garden in the middle of a forest.

*Must not go there.*

Do. Not. Think.

Across the hall there's one of those smokers' bars, open at the sides, with a roof extractor fan. The people huddled underneath it are sucking in their poison with open desperation while they down caffeine shots. If Em was here she would wrap her legs around a bar stool, her lips around her cigarette holder, and the barista around her little finger. She would give him the full Lauren Bacall treatment. She would take her coffee with a shot of Absolute on the side. And extra sugar.

Tobacco. Coffee. Sugar. Three plants that drove the slave trade.

How many of these were necessary for human survival? None. How many were highly addictive? All of them.

Three addictions that changed the world.

Could people have done the things they did in pursuit of tobacco, coffee and sugar without being gripped by a chemical obsession? How many souls were uprooted, families broken, villages razed, hearts wrung, children torn from parents, people treated worse than animals, animals treated like slaves, all because of a desire – a desire, not a need – for certain plants?

Who but people mad on drug lust could have conceived of such a thing?

There's an empty table with a padded bench inside Starbucks, just waiting to remind me that empires are still being built around those cravings. The table is tucked

away toward the back. A good place to hunker down for a while. Not that I'm hiding, or anything.

*Watch your back.*

There's that mermaid logo. I seem to remember she used to have breasts, and you could see the fork of her tail where it split in two. She was a much more lascivious mermaid, back then. Now she's been all cleaned up, modernised to suit coy America. Now all you can see are the ends of the tail, which she holds off stage like two limp fish, while the stylised zigzag of her hair hides her breasts.

Will I ever be able to enter a Starbucks again without thinking of Yemanjá?

The atmosphere is so blandly international, it could be anywhere. And I want to feel Brazil for just a little bit longer. The coffee, at least, should be local.

Brazil's first coffee seeds were obtained by a subterfuge. Now I know how the envoy felt, the one the King of Portugal sent to French Guyana in 1727 to get his hands on some coffee. When the French governor refused to share his precious beans, the envoy, Francisco de Mello Palheta, charmed the governor's wife into giving him some. Who knows how he convinced her, but the shoots and beans she slipped into the bouquet of flowers she gave him as a parting gift were enough to get the Brazilian coffee industry up and running.

Coffee took hold in Brazil's south, but in Salvador and the rest of the northeast, sugar still reigned supreme. And needed slavery to do so.

People followed seeds, and seeds followed people. In sacks and boots and bedding, in crates and pockets and cloth, some accidentally, others intentionally. Like my *Newbouldia mundii*.

The natural selection of plants was directed to suit human tastes and desires. Unless the plants themselves had something to do with it?

Did I pursue the seed, or did the seed call me? Was I summonsed?

I think it was Michael Pollan who first suggested that plants might be in control. His audacious epiphany, in *Botany of Desire*, was that, while bees thought they were deciding which flower to choose and which to avoid, the flower traits those bees 'selected' over evolutionary millennia were pre-designed by the plants themselves to

manipulate bee vanity. What if we, too, were controlled by plants, and not the other way around?

Was it really such a crazy thought? How long had it taken men to come around to the fact that it was actually the sun, and not ‘their’ earth, that was at the centre of everything?

Coffee, sugar, tobacco, spices, cotton, tea, rubber, cocoa – they all provided justification for expansion, domination, and the enslavement of millions.

Plants gave their names to the ‘Spice Islands’, the ‘Coco Bays’ the ‘Coffeelands’. Plants caused revolutionary ‘Tea Parties’, plants gave us the fixes that fixed places in our collective consciousness – Darjeeling, Durban Poison, Virginia Leaf, Arabica Bean, Bogota Powder.

Was it the plants that found ways of enticing, captivating, addicting us, to the extent that we would move mountains, conquer lands, trade people, in order to possess them?

No. I think plants are innocent. Lust for tea and spices may have spurred early explorers to find new routes east, but so did gunpowder and gold. Although plants, unlike those lifeless commodities, required lush lands. New Worlds made it possible to grow crops en masse. Crops that we began to feel we could not live without, even though they provide no real sustenance. Rather, as with all things in excess, a potential for harm.

Lust, greed or addiction – which was it that convinced me to come on this expedition in the first place? And which one of them is calling me to turn around and stay?

My mission is accomplished. There’s no good reason to stay. I’m heading home.

*Home? Where is that, exactly?*

There are places here that have become familiar. One place in particular that smells of pepper and coriander and pine. Sweet, sweet sweat.

Perhaps home was a person, after all.

*Stop that!*

There is one place that is always reliably familiar. The one I default to. This one. The in-between place. The no-man’s land called transit.

When in doubt, take off.



My coffee finished, this bench is starting to feel too tight. And I really need to pee. On the other side of the concourse I can see the ubiquitous symbols. Little stick man, little stick lady. To get there I will have to pass a blue grey uniform. And brown fur. Man and dog. Airport guard. Trained to sniff out contraband.

Can they sniff out fear? Or guilt? They say dogs can detect cancer. What about confusion? Loneliness? Despair? If that were the case, everyone would be a suspect. And the crime its own punishment.

The bathroom is white, sterile. I have to fight a sudden urgency. Too many *cafezinhos*? They're more diuretic than tea. My Five Roses ran out half way through the 40 days, but even so, coffee doesn't usually have this severe an effect. Christ, that's all I need – to spend the entire flight queuing for the bathroom. Those tiny cubicles make me want to scream.

At least this restroom isn't as crowded as the ones on the way out. They were full of families bathing in basins, and all the towel and toilet roll dispensers were soon empty. I remember one desperate woman holding her screaming baby, bottom up, under the blast from a wall mounted blow dryer.

It seems clean enough, this cubicle of space. Still, I'm hovering, so as not to touch anything. Plenty of wide-open space soon. Spring should be in full swing now, the mountainsides will be spiked pink and orange with watsonias. First thing I'm going to do is take Vavi for a walk...

I guess I stand up too quickly, because the wall spins. I put out a hand to steady myself. Damn – touched something after all.

*I feel so diff-er-ent...* Where did Sinead O'Connor pop up from? Earworm, Nick would call it. Nick. Doesn't even know I'm on my way back. When did I stop writing to him?

*You know when.*

*Don't. Go. There.*

For 40 days I've had nothing but the songs of Salvador going through my brain. Gal Costa, the Tribalistas -- Arnaldo Atunes with his crazy deep basso profundo, Marisa Monte and Carlinhos Brown – they're all in my suitcase along with Caetano Veloso and Bebel Gilberto, Olodum and Os Mutantes. And that CD from the guy who was playing

in our café one night. He burned his own recordings, slipped in a photograph of himself and scrawled his name on the CD in permanent pen. The recording was tinny and awful. But ...

*Our café.*

There's a pink *boto* in my luggage too, the small river dolphin carved out of rosewood. A gift for Marilese. And a book on Brazilian legends for the kids, with a story of the shape shifter.

When I was little I used to dream about the *boto*, after I first saw them rise pink-flanked out of the Amazon. When the moon was right, it was said, the *boto* would change into a man – a totally irresistible man, in a sharp white suit and jaunty hat. He would appear magically at a social dance, blend with the moonstruck crowds, and lure innocent young girls into a night of unrivalled pleasure.

By daybreak he would be gone. Dissolved back into the river, pink and naked, with the dolphin's knowing smile. In Amazonia, the *boto* was an accepted scapegoat for teenage pregnancy. 'But *papai*,' the hapless young girl would say, when her new pink baby began to grow inside her. 'I could not help it, it was the *boto*!'

## Salvador, Bahia

### vii

She remembers that first real day in the garden. At the appointed hour she found Zé drinking coffee with a small group on the veranda of the *terreiro*'s canteen kitchen. Their chat and banter stopped as she approached. Zé introduced her hurriedly, drained his cup, and signalled her to follow him into the garden. She felt the eyes of the group on her as she walked away, their voices started up again only when she and Zé had passed out of their field of vision.

He walked in front of her, sliding down some of the steeper parts, without waiting to see whether she was keeping up. She wondered why no one had made access to the garden easier. Perhaps not that many people came this way. Or perhaps they kept it intentionally tricky, to discourage visitors. Or maybe Zé was just so used to it that it didn't occur to him to do anything about it.

He didn't mention the incident on the other steps. It was as if it never happened.

The temperature dropped noticeably as soon as they entered under the canopy; the air felt richer. She breathed in the scent of decay and regrowth, of new oxygen.

Maddy scanned the tree contours continually. Her eyes slipped over rounded canopies or umbrella tops; the one she was looking for was medium sized, slim and narrow. If *Newbouldia mundii* was here, it had some serious competition. In floristic terms, Bahian old growth forest was as diverse as the fynbos back home. One researcher plotted 450 tree species in one 100 square metre patch of forest – that's more than occurs in the whole of North America. She had her work cut out.

Zé seemed to be leading her deep into the centre of the garden. They passed the clearing with the *peregun* where they first met, continued winding through thick undergrowth until they came to a natural amphitheatre where the forest opened up to let in light. Rough stands of herbs and vegetables were bordered by bamboo fences draped with sun-loving vines. A maracuja in full flower displayed an indecent amount of white petticoat. At the far edge of the clearing a fallen ficus provided a natural log bench. Zé motioned for her to sit, and squatted down in front of her.

‘Today I will introduce you to the garden.’ He was more formally dressed than last time, and all in white. His collarless shirt had a tracing of embroidery at the neckline. He had green and red beads around both wrists, and his toes kept clinging and releasing the thong of his *havaianas* as he rocked back and forth on his haunches.

Out of the corner of her eye she spotted a small column of red fire ants marching in single file and disappearing under the log.

‘We grow more than one hundred plants here,’ he began. ‘Many of them originated in Africa. Some were already here when our people came.’

Just knowing that some of these plants were directly descended from seeds brought over by slaves made the garden seem more portentous. She knew that some would have merged and evolved and hybridised over time, but others would have stayed true to type.

‘Each one is associated with a different orixá,’ Zé continued, ‘depending on its healing properties, or the colour of its flower, or whether it is hot or cold – these things tell us if its essence is of a particular orixá.’

Over his shoulder she saw tall, slim trees standing like sentinels at the clearing edge. Glabrous leaves, dark green and waxy, clustered racemes of flowers, tinged with mauve. *Newbouldia laevis*. She feels her breath catch.

‘Akokô,’ he said, without turning around.

‘It is the cousin of the one I am looking for,’ she couldn’t stop her voice betraying her excitement. ‘In West Africa it’s also called the ‘boundary tree’, people plant them between properties...’

‘The Yoruba people planted them in sacred places,’ his voice was low and level. ‘You would find them outside the homes of kings.’ He stood up. ‘It is one of Xangô’s trees.’

He walked over to the tallest of the akokôs. ‘This one was brought by Pierre Verger, you know him?’ She nodded, grateful for the primer she got at Ernesto’s house. ‘At the beginning of last century there was only one of these sacred trees in the whole of Salvador. So in the 1940s, he went to Nigeria and brought back some cuttings. He gave them to the most important *terreiros* in Salvador.’

He turned and reached up to grab a small branch. Had she really thought she would teach him anything? These plants were his life. The trees were only medium height, but still he had to stretch to pull a branch down, exposing the skin on his back. Even in her quickening excitement at being one step closer to *Newbouldia mundii* she couldn't help but linger on the contrast of the pale braided band around his middle with his darker skin. He caught her looking away as he turned back to her.

She had only seen the flower before in photographs. It was tubular shaped, its lip split into four slightly crumpled petals, tinged with pink. She breathed in their sweet smell and something else, musk and pepper.

'The leaves of the Akokô are worn for luck. And to attract money.' He was squatting in front of her again. She stared at his feet. She was not a foot fetishist, but they were truly beautiful. Long, jointed toes, elegant even with the happy juxtaposition of a blue patterned Band-Aid on the littlest toe of his left foot. It had some sort of cute yellow cartoon on it. Tweety Bird, she guessed.

His flops were decidedly feminine, light purple with – she would find out later – a gold twirling pattern on the upper soles, hidden now by the pad of his foot. Under the white cotton pants, his leg bulged where the long thigh joined the knee. She made this bit of muscle her point of focus. She could look at this neutral space and take in the rest of him, subliminally, all at once, without seeming to stare.

'It is of Xangô, but usually the flowers of Xangô are red. He is a hot orixá.'

'The flowers of the version I am looking for are just like this, but red...' If they are to be found in any *terreiro*, she wonders, would it not be in one ruled over by Xangô?

'Tia Betinha remembers the day Fatumbi Verger brought the cuttings here. You can ask her about it. I will introduce you.'

Before she could press him further about the red flowers, he added, 'Most of Xangô's plants are tall trees. They are the ones that attract lightning.'

Zé found his stride as he walked her around the garden. He started at the outward edges of the clearing, moving in widening circles, pausing to point out a flower or herb, naming its god or goddess, paying homage to each orixá and following their naming with the soft exhortation, 'Axé!'

*Ash-eh!*

He was presenting the garden to her as a host would a stranger to a dinner party of old friends, with utmost care and courtesy.

But he was only introducing her to the common plants, ones that she would already be familiar with. Camomile and mint for Oxum, small wild strawberries (Xangô again), a fragrant lemongrass-like reed (for the hunter, Oxossi). And going so quickly that she couldn't keep track of all the sacred connections.

The last flower he showed her was a white lily-like flower which looked, with its frilly gyre, like an upturned wedding skirt.

'This one we call *cornet*. It is of Oxalá, the orixá of peace. All white flowers belong to him. If he was your orixá and you were sick, the mãe- or pai-de-santo would mix you a remedy that contains the herbs you need. Or she might mix you something to change your energies.'

They were back at the log, and her head was spinning. The column of fire ants was nowhere to be seen.

'This one is of Ossain,' he said, pointing at a clump of swaying narcissus. 'He also rules the almond tree, and the dendê.' It makes sense that the orixá of herbs would rule that Bahian food staple.

'But doesn't Ossain rule *all* the plants?'

He regarded her as one would a stupid child. 'Ossain is the only one who knows the secrets and uses for all. But as I have shown you, each orixá has his or her own plants also. There is a reason for that, but it's a long story. Perhaps it should wait for another time?'

He cocked his head at her.

'What I'd like to know more about is how you propagate the seasonal plants, and store them. How you keep the seeds.' *And where.*

She realised that she had blundered. His demeanour changed, a cloud passing over the sun. How carefully had he choreographed this lesson, how carefully constructed the circle of story that she had thoughtlessly broken?

'The seeds are kept secure.' He hadn't moved, but it felt like he had withdrawn to the other side of the clearing.

She pressed on. 'At the seed bank we can keep seeds for 50 years, in refrigeration. But we still have to grow them out every 15 years or so, to make sure they are still viable. I would imagine that you have some kind of system, for the older seeds?'

'This is a living garden.'

'Yes, but I mean, they can't all be on the vine, as it were...'

'The *mãe-de-santo* takes care of them. She keeps them safe.'

*Safe from fire?* she wanted to ask. *Safe from flood?*

How to make him see the greater importance of what he had here, beyond the arcane and archaic ritualistic dance of the orixás?

*What about safe from the exploitation of unscrupulous multinational companies intent on exploiting them for profit in the name of biomedical innovation?* She surprises herself with the question. *If he shared them with you, could you really keep them safe from that?*

Well, it wasn't like the seeds would be harmed. Quite the contrary. *But they would be patented. Owned.* Is it ownership, or guardianship?

'You know, some of the plants here are endangered now, where they came from...'

He continued to regard her blankly, as if what she was saying had absolutely no bearing on him or what he did.

'Some of them might even be extinct,' she pushed on. 'Without the seed, you can't have the plant.'

'And without the plant, *you* can't have the seed.'

He rose abruptly and walked to a dense cluster of bushes on the eastern boundary of the glade.

He seemed to take a long time with his head bent down, talking to the plant. When he returned he was holding leafy spray dotted with what look like small peppercorns. She recognised the Nigerian malaguetta pepper.

'I made a grave mistake.' He was a humble acolyte once more. 'I neglected to begin our talk by introducing one of the most important orixás: *Exu*, who rules communications.' He bowed his head, closed his eyes for a moment, his lips moving silently. '*Exu* stands at the crossroads, and at the borders between worlds,' he continued.

His eyes were open now. She saw gold flecks in the deep brown. The colour you see when you open your eyes underwater in a Cederberg mountain pool, and swim towards a shaft of sun reaching in. 'He is a petulant god,' Zé grinned. 'He does not like to be ignored.'

*A little like you?*

She felt a sharp sting in her left buttock.

'Damn!' She jumped up, swatting at her pants. The slim red ant column marched across her seat.

Zé laughed. 'Come with me.' Her rudeness forgiven, he offered her his hand to step her over the log, and lead her across to a patch of vegetables. He squatted down next to a bottle gourd plant and picked up a small green squash, still immature. 'This we call *cabaça*. It symbolises the connection between the earth and the spirit world.' He rolled the green calabash between his fingers. 'When our people arrived here in Salvador, it was already here, exactly the same as in Africa. As if the orixás, they knew we were coming.' He lay the squash gently back down on the ground. 'It is also said to be the magical container of Ossain. Remember this when you hear Ossain's story.'

She realised with a sinking sense of disappointment that she would not be hearing the story from him today. Their time in the garden was over.

She followed him back up the steep path, keeping her eye on the tricky footing, and all her other senses on the man in front of her.

She already wished it were tomorrow.



## Salvador, Bahia

### viii

She expected Zé to leave her at the garden entrance. Instead, he walked her through the compound to a flat roofed building near the main gate. ‘Wait here,’ he told her, and ducked inside.

Along the way she’d noticed a number of small, square houses; one-roomed huts, dedicated to each of the orixás. Each one had the name of its resident deity over the door, and was painted in the associated colour. None of them was open.

Dotted around the outer edges of the compound were other houses, some with washing hanging out to dry and other signs of being occupied. The one she waited in front of had kitchen clattering and the TV chatter coming through the door. The door was painted red and hung slightly ajar.

The sun was baking the top of her bare head and she was beginning to long again for the coolness of the forest when Zé emerged from the doorway.

‘Tia Betinha says she will see you. She remembers when Fatumbi Verger brought the Akokô. You can ask her.’

He walked Maddy through a short dark passage past a warren of rooms, to a crowded living room at the back of the building. A small boy slouched at one end of a dining room table, watching an episode of The Simpsons dubbed into Portuguese. Bart Simpson cackled at someone’s expense, in exactly the same tone as he did in the American original.

The other end of the table was crowded with dolls like the ones she had seen in the museum, dressed to represent the various orixás. Her eye took in red, green, and turquoise, while the smell of stew from the kitchen reminded Maddy how long it had been since breakfast.

Under the window there was a long bench, and on a chair next to it Tia Bethinha sat. She must have been at least 80 years old. Her hair was tied up in a patterned scarf, the

beads that hung over her white cotton shirt were red and white, green and blue. There was a suppliant kneeling at her feet.

She acknowledged Maddy and indicated for her to sit on the bench while she continued to attend to the woman, who seemed to be reeling off a long list of requests. There was no sign of Zé.

Maddy had a chance to take in her surroundings while she waited. She counted at least four clocks, three on the walls and one on the mantelpiece. All of them were set to different times. None of them seemed to be moving.

Eventually the woman kissed Tia Betinha's hands and thanked her. On her way out, the woman ruffled the hair of the young boy and he raised his focus from the TV long enough to ask his grandmother when they would be eating. It sounded as if it wasn't the first time he'd asked the question that day. There was a clock hanging over the door, and Tia Betinha looked at it for such a long while that Maddy figured she had either lost her train of thought, or was calculating time. The clock said five past seven, but Maddy knew it was barely past noon. The school bell had gone off as they were leaving the garden.

'In a little while,' Tia Betinha told him. Maddy found herself between a hungry old woman and her lunch. She didn't know what to do. Half an hour ago she didn't even know this person existed. Now she felt like she was being presented with some kind of test. For which, once again, she was totally unprepared.

'What can I do for you, my daughter?' Tia Betinha's voice was gentle, and free of guile. She radiated pure love, and not a shred of resentment. Maddy wished she could stay there, just sitting in her aura, for a very long time.

Instead, she started talking. She explained where she had come from, her work with plants, her interest in the *terreiro* garden. She told about the presentation she would give here in a few days time. Tia Betinha expressed polite interest, and assured her that she would attend.

Maddy explained about the cousin of the akokô tree that had been lost in Africa.

And then she didn't have to explain anymore because Tia Betinha began talking. Maddy had to lean in close to hear her, above the noise of traffic outside and the excitable TV commercials.

‘Iroko,’ she said. ‘If you cut a branch from Iroko, you lose an arm. If you cut his trunk, you will lose a leg. There are those who are afraid even to look at Iroko for fear that they will be struck dead.’ Maddy’s wide eyes must have conveyed her confusion, because Tia Betinha broke into a wide smile and pointed to a picture on the wall. A man, or god, standing in front of a tree, his brown skin blending with the trunk, his face obscured by a crown of leaves, a thick white loin cloth preserving modesty. A tree orixá, of course! She recalled the thick white ribbons tied like cummerbunds around the trees around the garden. Iroko? Tia’s smile made her look like a young girl. ‘We should hug a tree every day. Every day we should hug a tree!’ She reached out and took Maddy’s hand. ‘And always keep your promises to Iroko. This is most important. His realm is time, he rules over life and death.’ She kept a hold of Maddy’s hand in her small dry one and stared into the middle distance for a long moment.

‘I remember when pai brought the akokô here,’ she continued, eventually. ‘I was a very young girl, only five years old. He arrived with the branches in his arms, like a baby. They were wrapped in his shirt, which he kept wet, all the way from Africa.’ She shook her head as if she still couldn’t believe it, seven decades on. ‘They had leaves sticking out, some of them. The leaves were still on. All the way from Africa.’

‘José Carlos told me that the akokô is one of Xangô’s trees?’

Tia Betinha nodded. Her next words were drowned out by the roar of a passing bus. Maddy pressed on.

‘And the akokô’s cousin, *Newbouldia mundii*? I don’t know if it has another Yoruba name. But the flowers are red and the leaves a little...’ she makes the shape with her hands. Tia Betinha regarded her for a very long time. Maddy was not sure if she misunderstood her, or if she, Maddy, had transgressed a boundary. Again.

‘It is because of Xangô that all the orixás have their own herbs. Do you know that story of his battle with Ossain?’

Maddy shook her head. She sensed that the boy was glaring in her direction, and saw Tia Betinha cast her eye again at the clock over the door.

‘There is time,’ she said. And she began.

*Xangô was jealous of the power Ossain had over the leaves, Tia Betinha's voice changed timbre, becoming low and hypnotic, and so compelling that even the Simpsons couldn't compete.*

*Ossain knew which plants could calm, and which could excite and stimulate; he knew which ones brought luck, or glory, or honour. He also knew which ones brought misery, sickness, and accidents.*

There was a screech of brakes – Bart Simpson dodging a car.

*No other orixá had any power over any plant. So they all needed Ossain to help them maintain good health, or to guide their initiatives towards success.*

*Ossain had been given this power by the high queen, Olodumaré. But imperious Xangô, whose temperament is impatient and combative, was irritated by this disadvantage. He concocted a plan to usurp Ossain's power over the plants.*

*He told his plan to his wife, Iansã, impetuous orixá of the wind and storms and stars. On certain days, he explained, Ossain carried a gourd containing all the most powerful leaves, suspended on an Iroko branch.*

The cabaça gourd, Maddy thought, pleased with herself for paying attention.

*'On one of these days,' Xangô told her, 'you must conjure a tempestuous wind.' Iansã was delighted to accept such a mission.*

*On the appointed day she called down a wind that blew with such force that it lifted the roofs off houses. It uprooted trees, it destroyed everything in its path and in the end, tore the gourd off the branch on which it hung, and threw it to the ground.*

*The gourd rolled along the ground a long, long way, tumbling and turning as it went, so that all of the leaves were scattered out and away from it.*

*The orixás were quick to take advantage – they sought and seized all of the leaves as they blew about in the wind, so that every one claimed one or another of them.*

Tia Betinha waved her hands in front of her to suggest chaotic, tumbling, dispersing.

*But only Ossain knew the leaves' secrets. He alone retained control over their virtues, and over the words that must be incanted over them to provoke them into action.*

*And so, in this way, he continues to reign over the plants, and remains their true guardian, with absolute power.*

*‘Gracas ao poder – Axé! - que possui sobre elas.’ Tia Betinha concluded. Thanks to the power – Axé! – he holds over them.*

Her response was automatic, involuntary: *‘Axé!’*

*Ash-eh!*

It was like a sneeze, this ‘amen’ to the orixás.

It was the first time she ever invoked the name.

It was the moment she stepped fully into the game.

When she emerged back into the bright sunlight she was surprised to find Zé sitting on a low wall, waiting for her. He stood up to meet her.

‘Did she tell you the story?’

Maddy nodded. ‘And she told me I should come back each afternoon when I’m finished in the garden, so she can tell me more.’ She grins at him. ‘Tomorrow I’m joining her for lunch’.

‘That’s good.’ he said. The school bell rang to signal the end of the learning day. ‘And tonight, you will join me for dinner.’

## Salvador, Bahia

### ix

‘Don’t tell me you are falling for that voodoo mumbo jumbo?’

Kirk’s voice was harsh over the phone line, distorted by distance. The connection in her room wasn’t robust enough for Skype.

‘It’s a very closed community Kirk. And so far they’ve been incredibly welcoming and helpful, thanks to Ernesto opening doors. I’m just doing what I need to do to earn their trust.’

‘But still no sign of the tree.’

Outside the grey clouds were massing, as they did every afternoon.

‘I’ve been in the garden precisely twice Kirk. It’s a jungle out there, literally. Saw lots of boundary trees though.’

‘*Newbouldia laevis* I can find down the road.’

She’d glimpsed his petulant side before, working with him over so many years. Until now it had always been directed at someone else.

‘It’s actually very interesting, the way they categorise the plants for healing and, what they call “magical” work. All according to these deity archetypes. If I was a proper ethnobotanist I’d set up a display in Kirstenbosch, link it to the traditional African healing garden.’

‘This is not a touchy feely playing in the garden mission, Maddy.’

‘Until you get those permissions that’s exactly what it is.’ A gust of wind billowed the curtains and the balcony door swung on its hinges. She stretched the phone cord as far as it would go and just managed to reach the door to shut it. ‘How long until we get those?’

‘There’s a slight hitch.’

Her long silence asked the question.

‘Turns out there’s been a significant change in Brazilian legislation in the last ten years. Permissions need to be applied for *before* the researcher arrives in the country.’

Had he really not known this?

A squall of rain spattered against the window pane. Out at sea long rays of sunlight forced the clouds open, reaching down to light up patches of water.

‘You there Maddy?’

‘I’m processing what you’re saying.’ The squall had already passed, and sunlight lit up the droplets on the balcony railing. ‘So I need to leave, come back home, re-apply and then come out here again?’

Or they might just send someone else to find the seed. Strange that the thought filled her with such dismay. She only just got here. She was hardly even over her jetlag. And she was starting to feel fond of the little star seed, to invest in the idea that she might be the one to find it and save it.

‘No, no, we’re working on it from this side. You just carry on there. When are you doing your dog-and-pony?’

Maddy’s laptop was open on the bed, showing a slide from her PowerPoint presentation, a close-up on the orange *leonotis leonurus* flower, also known as ‘wild dagga’. There had not been a single presentation where she hadn’t assured a giggling audience that you shouldn’t smoke the plant; despite its name, and a slight similarity in the hand-shaped, serrated leaves, it had no relation to marijuana. What you *can* use the herb for, she would tell them, is to treat snakebite and scorpion stings. In places where it was known as ‘*umfincafin Kane*’, homesteaders planted it around their huts to keep away vipers and adders. She had masses of it outside her own forest veranda. She liked the way its prolific flowers attracted sunbirds. Or, as they called them here, the *beijaflor* – *kiss the flower*.

Her presentation was a tour of the African medicinal garden in Kirstenbosch, with pictures of the plants in situ and in their traditional setting, being used by rural and urban sangomas, and a few remote farmers still in touch with old Dutch medicine. For a moment she was taken there, to the magnificent garden, the jewel green lawns and the wooded slopes of the amphitheatre on the back of Table Mountain. In her mind’s eye she could see the view Kirk would be looking at, from his office. Through the earpiece she could hear the impatient drumming of his pencil on the desktop.

Outside her window on the other side of the Atlantic, the sunlight had burnished the steely surface of the sea, its light so bright it dazzled.

‘The presentation is next week.’ She didn’t tell him that it won’t be any match for Zé’s performance of this morning. That’s what it had been – a tightly choreographed show. He’d been tasked to give her something in exchange for what she was, supposedly, bringing them. He was fulfilling his side of the bargain. And she’d been so intent on her *actual* mission that she had been impatient and ungracious.

She was not entirely sure what part tonight’s dinner played in this pageant.

‘What exactly does Ernesto think I am after?’ It was the first time she has thought to ask the question. Kirk’s drumming stopped abruptly.

‘I told you, as far as they are concerned it is a cultural exchange. They know of course that we are looking for *N. mundii* as part of it, as part of our interest in rare seeds. But they don’t know that our interest goes beyond saving the tree from extinction.’

‘Does it?’

Kirk’s pause was a little too long. ‘Well, let’s just say if they knew about the pharmacological interest, they might do a deal with someone else, and not give us access. But once we get the go ahead from the Brazilian ministry, and as long as you convince them that our motives are pure, the local people will fall into line.’

Maddy was not so sure. The people who tend the *terreiro* are hardly strangers to conflict with authority. As recently as the 1970s, the practice of candomblé was officially banned in Salvador. Their freedom to practice openly and legitimately was hard-fought. Some practices had been clandestine, some conducted brazenly under the noses of the authorities. They were unlikely to roll over and allow those traditions to be messed with by any outside ‘authority’.

And Maddy could understand why. It was like colonisation all over again, this race of imperialist egos wanting ownership. They could tell themselves that they were doing it for the greater good of the plant. Or that Pollan’s hypothesis is correct, and that the seed was orchestrating the entire thing. That they were merely pawns in the seed’s game.

‘This is starting to feel a little too clandestine for my liking.’

‘Oh come on Maddy, we’re the good guys!’

For the first time, she wasn’t so sure.



After her shower Maddy threw open the veranda doors again and let the humid air play against her naked skin. The storm had moved far out to sea, stabbing forks of lightning down onto the surface. Zeus shaking hands with his old rival Poseidon.

Or perhaps it was Xangô inviting Yemanjá to dance.

Maddy should have been a storm chaser. The louder, the angrier, the more thrilling. She'd never lost her fear of them, or her fascination. She had climbed to high places and stood exposed, hard water stinging her eyes, and invited electric fingers to reach out and claim her like they had her mother. But they never did.

She knew they wouldn't. Even as the flashes turned the insides of her eyelids orange, and as she shook with the exertion of standing against the wind, she felt exultant – she was still standing!

And again, she felt the other side of victory, which was shame.

Lightning doesn't strike twice, people would say. It doesn't have to, she wanted to tell them. Once is enough.

'Step on a crack, you break your mother's back; step on a line, you break your father's spine.' The old Pittsburgh schoolyard chant runs through her head while she dresses. 'Maddy's gone sad again,' Olive in her black braids would say, and sometimes the others laughed to hide their fear. They knew Maddy had just lost her mother.

Maddy would join in their hand-slapping choruses: 'Miss Mary Mack-Mack-Mack all dressed in black-black-black ...' But all she could think of, while she patty-caked hands with Olive, or one of the other convent girls, was 'lightning crack-crack-crack'.

One bleak autumn day, when the leaves had all fallen but the snow hadn't yet, Olive showed Maddy the corner in the disused Bloomfield lot that had magical grey dust. If you drew a shape in this dust, she said, and left it there through winter, it would freeze hard and still be there in the spring – and permanently, forever after. They spent sunless afternoons with their fingers in the soft dirt drawing angels, winged and haloed, like Christmas decorations.

Maddy never found out if the angels survived the snow season. Before the first daffodils came out, her aunt Bella had gone south with her motorman, and Maddy had moved on to Baltimore.

Maddy fluffed out her hair in a vain attempt to dry it despite the humidity. Olive's mother Nancy ran a hairdressing parlour in her brownstone basement. Olive's hair always smelt like Johnson's No-More-Tears anti-tangle spray. Nancy told Maddy she could come in any time for a wash and blow-dry, even though Maddy's hair had been cut short after the electric hairdryer incident. It hung straight and fine, and there was nothing much anybody could do with it.

You would never see Maddy in barrettes with butterflies or bobbed hair ties in glitter colours. Her hair, unlike the rest of Maddy, was easy maintenance. And since she never knew quite where she would be going next during those transit years, it suited everybody just fine.

She cleared a patch in the bathroom mirror fog and peered at herself. Her hair was a little longer, and somewhat more stylish. Her pixy look, Nick used to call it. She stared hard into the mirror. Eyes looked back at her. Eyes she has known forever. 'Anybody home?' she asked.

The young night porter stopped her on her way out. He was a lanky teenager, his scrawny neck rosy with the permanent blush of acne. That, and his almost painful deference, made him seem unsuited for a job with such a public interface.

'*Desculpe,*' he said, handing her another blue message without looking her in the eye. 'The man from Manaus, he called again. Your phone was busy.'

'Thank you.' Maddy took the blue note, glanced at it briefly, then crumpled it up.

He watched her lean over the reception desk and toss it, in a perfect arc, into the wastepaper basket.

## Salvador, Bahia

### X

They had arranged to meet at the Praça da Sé.

She bought a coconut, trepanned by a vendor with a rusty machete, and sipped the cool water through a straw while she waited next to the statue in the middle of the square. Despite the bacchanalian activities around him, Bishop Pedro Fernandes Sardinha (1496 – 1556) wore a sombre expression. Perhaps he disapproved of indulgence. Or of the way his dark cowl had been anointed with pigeon shit.

‘You know why he is famous?’

She hadn’t heard Zé come up behind her, but she felt the warmth of him now as he whispered with exaggerated melodrama into her left ear. She shook her head, and felt strands of her hair stand up static against his lips as he breathed: ‘They ate him.’

When she jerked back she bumped him with the back of her head, and blushed at her own clumsiness. His eyes laughed at her, but the rest of him was gracious, almost courtly, as he offered her an arm to lead her away from the statue. All of his gestures had this same studied elegance. He seemed a lot more playful now, away from the constraints of the *terreiro*. And he played this chivalrous Brazilian charm to perfection.

‘And who is “they”?’ She fell into step beside him.

‘Caeto Indians.’ He nodded a greeting at a dona selling *pasteis* at the far side of the square. ‘You know Jorge Amado?’

‘Of course.’

‘He says it is typical of the *Bahiana*, that this person should be celebrated here, in this famous square, when all he did for Salvador was provide one dinner!’

It was only when they arrived at the small Bahian eatery that she realised she should have paid better attention to their route through the maze of side streets. She would never be able to find it again on her own – and she could already tell by the smells that the food would be excellent.

The owner was a large woman with an immaculate white apron over her long frilled skirt. She clasped Zé Carlos to her, planting a possessive *beijinho* on each of his

cheeks, and appraised Maddy from a safe distance. Maddy felt Dona Marta's eyes boring in to her back as she followed Zé to a table. She was being measured, but she had no idea of the yardstick.

Only two other tables were occupied this early. At one, a middle aged couple. At the other, a thin old man who ate alone, completely absorbed in the yellow mound on his plate. He was missing the two middle fingers of his right hand, but this didn't seem to affect his dexterity as he forked food methodically into his mouth.

On the wall above their table a yellowing *Veja* Magazine cover in a plastic frame showed a feather-headed young samba queen bursting out of yellow and green sequins. 'Dona Marta's daughter,' Zé told her.

There was a blue vase of fresh white flowers under the only other picture in the place, a faded tapestry of Yemanjá – obligatory for any establishment serving *fruta de mar*. Only this Yemanjá, with her long blue veil and sanctimonious gaze, looked more like a middle-European Mary than an uncompromising African sea goddess. Maddy wasn't fazed – she was getting the hang of Salvador's porous syncretic borders.

A portable television above the till showed the rolling credits of a telenovela. Her daily fix satisfied, Dona Marta turned it off and came over to take their drink orders.

While Maddy's mouth watered over the menu descriptions of spicy seafoods swimming in coconut and dendê oil, Zé picked up the bishop's gruesome story.

'The Caeté Indians were sometimes cannibals, so it was not so special for them to eat the first white man they ever saw.' Zé attacked the crusty white bread Dona Marta set on the table between them while he spoke. 'Of course, this was all the provocation the Portuguese invaders needed. The governor of this new Brazil, Mem de Sá, used it as an excuse to make the Indians into slaves. But they were not suited to it. Which is why they began to bring slaves from Africa.'

'I wouldn't have thought anybody was "suited" to slavery.'

He looks startled. 'You are right, of course.' He shoved bread in his mouth and chewed for a while before adding matter-of-factly, 'My ancestors were among them.' He took the menu from her. 'I'll order. I know what is good here.'

Their drinks arrived – beer for him, caipirinha for her. She was working diligently on getting her 'caipirinha legs' back again – her all time best was eight in one night. It

could have been more – she couldn't remember anything after eight. While he ordered she closed her eyes and breathed in lime and cachaça –the strangely industrial petroleum-whiff and its high-octane promise. When she opened them Zé Carlos was holding his glass of Atlantica patiently. He raised one eyebrow in an exaggerated lift.

*'Saude.'*

She moaned in appreciation of the first sip, and he laughed. 'Caipirinhas suit you!'

She raised her glass to the picture of Yemanjá over the blue flowers. 'I used to think Yemanjá was just about fish. Now I am beginning to see worlds beneath worlds here.'

He raised his glass again. 'Worlds beneath worlds within worlds.'

By the time her second drink came they had found their flow, segueing between English and Portuguese in their attempt to find exactly the right words. His English was basic – he didn't get much chance to practise it, he said. He had a degree in philosophy and comparative religion, but made his living running his own gardening service. Outside of the *terreiro* he tended the lawns and verges in the richer neighbourhoods of Itaigara, Brotas and Pituba. He also supplied basic medicinal herbs to sellers in the city. He grew some of them – the more common ones – in the gardens he tended. For the most part, the garden's owners were unaware of their healing qualities. They just enjoyed the variety in their herbaceous borders.

During his routine trimming and pruning, Zé harvested material to sell to the city's candomblé leaf houses, which in turn supplied the business end of candomblé medicine for those who couldn't afford the time or the money for a consultation with a *mãe-de-santo*.

'I'd love to visit a leaf house!' she said.

'I can take you on the weekend, no problem. Next weekend I will be in Cachoeira.'

'Cachoeira?'

'Sometimes I travel out of Salvador, to get certain plants,' he told her. 'In Cachoeira there are beautiful forests. And rivers. Lots of different trees.' She thought he

might offer to take her there too. Instead he began to tell her about a remarkable sisterhood based in the small town, the ‘Sorority of Our Lady of the Good Death’.

Dona Marta arrived just then with steaming dishes that smelled of sea and spice.

‘The *Irmandade de Nossa Senhora da Boa Morte*,’ he told her, dishing rice and shrimp moqueca onto their plates, ‘was founded by freed women slaves who worked to help others buy their liberty.’ Dona Marta set a dish of farofa down in front of him and seemed to Maddy to be giving him a pointed look. He returned it with one that was openly defiant. ‘My great-great-grandmother was one of them.’

This ancestor – he couldn’t count exactly how many generations back – had been brought forcibly to Brazil in the early 1800s. Back home in Africa she had been a *curandiera* of great repute, and on this side of the Atlantic people continued to come to her for herbs, healing and advice.

So great was Oni’s reputation, he said, that the governor of Salvador called on her to attend to his sickly daughter, who had been weakened and depleted by the blood letting and concoctions of lead and mercury that were the ply of colonial doctors. ‘Oni’s herbs cured her. She was rewarded with her freedom.’

Zé continued his story around mouthfuls of acarajé – the same fried bean dumplings she had seen at the Baiana stalls and one of the foods, she learned, of Xangô. These ones were cut open, smeared with shrimp and chilli paste and filled with a kind of salsa. The lightning god had good taste, it seemed.

‘Oni’s husband was already a free man,’ Zé told her. ‘But he died in the 1835 rebellion. Flogged to death on the central square of Pelourinho, for his part in instigating the uprising.’

The whipping post. For all its picturesque charms, she had to remind herself that this is what Pelourinho is named for.

‘How awful’.

Zé nodded. ‘After that, Oni went to Cachoeira and became one of the founders of the *Irmandade da Boa Morte*.’

He stopped talking then, and attended to his food. Maddy thought about how the history of these streets were so palpably alive for Zé Carlos, and for others whose people had lived and died here over generations. She felt suddenly ashamed of her romanticised

reconstructions, her whistle-stop museum visits, her self-indulgent meanderings through myth. Did he think of his grandfather when he walked through the *Largo*, past the *casa de Jorge Amado* and the urchins tying ribbons on wrists, where the hands of new arrivals were once bound in chains?

‘Oni’s husband,’ he added, as if in afterthought, ‘he could have been the one who brought over your seed, the first time.’

He had acknowledged the seed. *Her* seed.

The meal was over. Zé suggested they finish the evening elsewhere.

She held her questions – and, it felt, her breath – until they were settled at a table with a blue gingham cloth overlooking a square called 15 November. A five-piece band was playing a lilting *choro*. She liked this café. She had stopped there before to drink coffee and watch the capoeiristas perform their war dances in the square. And she’d spent one evening there, working on growing her caipirinha legs. They served a good one.

She had also made friends with some of the stray cats that gathered on the courtyard of a grand building opposite the café. Through the wrought iron gate, which always seemed to be locked, night or day, she saw that somebody put out food and saucers of milk for them each day. She counted eight cats there last time she passed.

When their drinks arrived she asked him to tell her more about his great-grandfather.

‘He was a trader, not in people, but in food and fabrics, that kind of thing. He worked alongside the slavers. He travelled back and forth to Africa and brought back the things the slaves needed.’

‘So in a way he supported the slave trade?’

‘And he profited from it.’ Zé took a long swig of beer, wiping his mouth on the back of his wrist. She was becoming enchanted by the way the little horizontal fold creased up over his top lip whenever he smiled. She wanted to make him smile more, so she could watch it. But his topic was serious. ‘He was not always a good man, before he met my grandmother.’

‘Oni.’ There, she had made him smile.

‘Yes, Oni. And he was not always good after.’ He held the cold beer between flat hands and twirled it back and forth, back and forth. ‘But that was the bargain he made, with the slave traders. His freedom in return for aiding them.’

‘People do what they must do, to survive.’

She could not read the expression in his long look.

And then he said he was done talking. He wanted to hear more about her work. He called her a ‘seed hunter’. *A caçadora dos sementes*.

So she told him about the seed bank under the ice at Svalbard, a thousand kilometres from the North Pole. And how seeds were being kept there, in cryogenic limbo, preserved for future generations, secure enough to survive the most devastating man-made disaster.

She told him about Kew’s Millennium Bank and her own small contribution to the 200 million seeds – and counting – being kept there.

‘What does it cost, to keep these seeds?’

‘Altogether, in the region of \$2000 to seal, pack and protect each seed.’ He let out a slow whistle.

She told him about how they processed seeds in their short-term bank on the slopes of Table Mountain, before sending them off to Kew.

She made a point of telling him about *hoodia* and the efforts of her colleagues to protect the stake of the communities who traditionally used the plant – for thirst, not hunger, control – in the face of rapacious interest by the pharmaceutical industry on discovering that the plant could be marketed as a miracle weight loss cure.

And then she told him her favourite story, a success story for the institute.

The *gladiolus aureus* grew only on one particular spot on the Cape Peninsula – on the mountain slope that looked over the small bay of Kommetjie and across the ocean to the back of Table Mountain. Like too many of the vulnerable Cape flora, it was thought to be extinct until a few years ago, when a few precious seeds were tracked to a blood bank at Groote Schuur Hospital, where Chris Barnard had pioneered the first heart transplant a few decades before.

‘A blood bank?’ Zé looked truly confused.



‘Yes!’ She grinned at him. ‘And the way they were brought back from there was even more amazing!’

She told him how, in the 1970s, before Kirstenbosch had facilities to store live seeds, one of the botanists realised the lily’s future was precarious, and took some seeds to the nearest large refrigerator, which happened to be the one in the university’s medical institution. There they stayed, cold and forgotten – no one knows what became of the botanist – for a quarter of a century, until they were discovered during a routine clean out of the blood bank vault.

‘They were in a brown envelope, with *gladiolus aureus* scribbled on the front of it in ball point pen, and piled up with the rest of the junk headed for the garbage bin. So that would have been the end of the line for this particular gladiolus, if not for ward supervisor Mavis Sithole.’

Mavis was a keen gardener. Seeing ‘gladiolus’ on the envelope, she opened it to find a thimbleful of tiny seeds, in their paper-thin yellow skirts. She pocketed the envelope, and when she got home that night she planted the seeds in pots in the small kitchen garden of her Observatory home.

The seeds took. Come spring, delicate yellow flowers bloomed, and continued to bloom each year under her care. Until one day, she had a visit from a representative from the botanical institute. They had traced the plant, now officially extinct in the wild, to the blood bank. They were horrified to hear that the fridge had been cleared out. But since Mavis talked often and freely about her garden, one of her colleagues pointed the botanists her way. Mavis was only too happy to give them some of her pots to take back to Kirstenbosch, where they were propagated and reintroduced to the Kommetjie mountain slope, where they bloom again today.

Brought back from the brink.

‘You really love your seeds, don’t you?’ There was something calculating in the way he was looking at her. She had been totally caught up in her story. Had she told him too much? She was reminded that he too had a mission. He would protect the sanctity of the *terreiro*, its right to its privacy and its secrets and its rituals, its ownership of the resources it had nurtured for centuries, to the end.

She *was* crazy dedicated to her work. People always teased her about it. But would she die to protect a seed? She doubted it. He might though, if it came to protecting the *terreiro*. She didn't know how she knew that, but she was quite sure of it.

Right then, he was protecting it with evasion. And with his sudden laughter that unravelled her. And with his distracting lip crinkle. She wanted to run her tongue along the groove, and the full mouth beneath it.

But he moved first, turning her hands palm up and examining the network of small scars laced into the soft skin of her inner arms. It was such an intimate gesture, and yet she did not feel offended, did not pull away. He didn't say anything, only looked, holding her hands turned up with his thumbs pressed firmly into the centre of her palms. She liked the feel of her hands resting in his, but she wished he would raise his eyes from the evidence of her youthful self-hatred.

'Do you think that I will find it? This akokô cousin?'

'*A semente estrelinha*,' he said, at the same time finding a pressure point in her palm that set a delicious tingling shooting up all over her body.

*Little star seed.*

He knew exactly what she was looking for.

## **In Transit**

### **[III]**

I'm in the forest. Someone is after me; I need to hide. I climb into the lap of a sturdy, spreading tree, with masses of small, glossy leaves, and flared buttresses like thick thighs tethering it to the earth. Its roots cling to the soil like prehensile toes – I know this because when I climb into the tree, I become the tree. The roots become my toes, the branches my arms, the buttresses my hips and thighs. My head is crowned with leaves and I feel the power of the sap running through me. Heartwood and sapwood.

And it is nothing at all, it is simplicity itself, to unclench my root toes, pull them from the forest loam, flex my cambium like a supple skin, heave my trunk and swing into a stride, heavy but graceful on thick root legs.

As I gain momentum I feel a surge of pure energy. I am a jungle of vascular bundles. My sap pumps through xylem and phloem, my corpuscles are powered by chlorophyll.

Slipping through the other, still stationery trees, I have the grace of a dancer. I'm a sylph, disturbing nothing, leaving no trace of passage on the forest floor.

When a looming power-line threatens to tangle in my topmost branches, I contract, shrink down and skim under the cables unscathed.

The green gives way to grey asphalt, the sounds of my pursuers returns. I'm in a parking lot, sanded over with fine dirt. I am no longer the tree. I hold it in my hand now, shrunk down to bonsai-size, my protector needing protection.

I cast around for a place to put my tree self, until I can return it to the forest. Ahead of me a rusted car – once a sporty classic – one empty headlight socket staring blind, but just the right size. I put my tree in there, scooping in grey dust, packing it around the roots, aware that this will not be enough to feed this tree. But it will have to do for now. I do my best to disguise the tree so no one will notice it until I get back.

I promise that I will come back.

‘Sponsored by CNNBC,’ the voice says, and I open my eyes to find the television screen hanging side on. It is raining sideways on a weather chart, and the mermaid is smiling frozen at me from a paper cup. She looks like she is lying down, but I’m the one with my head on the table, back on my old bench.

How can I have slept after all that coffee?

Nothing is predictable anymore. The TV meteorologist striding in front of a map of northern Europe points out an unusually severe low-pressure system. I wait for her to show Cape Town, but she doesn’t.

The first winter storms always hit Cape Town on Easter weekend. The north wind brings rain, but the summer southeaster turns the water icy. The spring tides bring back sand to widen the beaches for summer crowds –in winter they’re much narrower, but wide enough for intrepid walkers who don’t mind being sprayed by sleet and sand.

That’s how it always was. But now these season changes came later, or earlier, or not at all. There are freak storms and hottest years and ‘worst droughts since’. The climate feels a little wilder and on edge.

People tune in to the weather with a different kind of attention now. Everyone knows the jargon of global warming, we can all connect the dots between the floods, the droughts, the heat, the blizzards – talking about the weather is no longer small talk, but survival talk. As it once was. Memory is short.

I’m going to miss the heat of Salvador.

What was it Neruda said, about forgetting?

*Love is so short, forgetting is so long...*

I should mail Em. I left Salvador in such a hurry, nobody even knows where I am, except Kirk.

My father doesn’t know I’ve left.

When will Zé?

*Do. Not. Think. Of. Zé.*

I could fire up my laptop right now, but I think I’ll just stay here a while, lying on the table, watching anonymous travellers pull in, walking sideways.

I wonder if Eddington felt like this, when he first sat at his table contemplating his elbow and the essential permeability of things. Which table is real, he wondered, the one

your elbow doesn't go through, or the one it theoretically could, if you could only enter the realm of spaces between molecules?

*Like a long-legged fly/upon the stream/her mind moves upon silence.* Em inscribed Yeats' words in the copy of Eddington's *The Nature of the Physical World* she gave me to take on that Amazon trip. What a perfect place to read it. I could relate to the long-legged fly. I knew what it was like to feel so insubstantial you could balance on the thin meniscus between two worlds, two states of being.

The mysteries of science were so comforting, when I was sixteen. Especially the kind of science that embraced what was not understood, perhaps could not ever be understood, using methods of predictability. It was about then that I decided to organise my own life around predictability and routine. I left very little room for randomness in my everyday. Didn't want change. Wanted to be a constant, in the chaos.

During my river epiphany, on an outing with Carlos the boat boy and his jungle marijuana, I decided I would always try to know, to understand, to measure, to deduce, if not by observation alone, then by a different, perhaps quantum, set of rules.

I thought I could hover above the mysteries, look down on them from science's lofty aerie. Well, that little fantasy just imploded, didn't it?

Maybe I'll just stay here forever, in this coffee diner with the mermaid logo and the international beans.

Even a coffee bean is a seed, waiting in a transit state. Between worlds, waiting for fertile soil. Or the roaster – grinder - percolator.

Oh god I wish I could unspool these last days, last weeks – how far back would I go? To white sheets crumpled at the bottom of the bed during a thunderstorm? To a flat brown rock by a river? To a red story in a green garden? To an indigo song on churchyard stairs? To a yellow skirt swirling in a *terreiro*? Could I stop then, or would the spooling continue, unwinding me, further and further back? Do I have to keep going back to everything that went before? Why can't I just move forward?

Better to stay here in the limbo space, where I have always been. Limbo. A word stretched evenly between two poles. A tight high wire and a safety net all in one.

It spanned Eddington's space between molecules. And the space in which orixás might live. The maybe space where two people connect, if they ever really do. Perhaps

it's only really our expectations that meet. So meeting doesn't exist, but the moment two people imagine that it might – that exists. Something can be brought into being by a conspiracy of wanting.

Our days in the *terreiro* garden were so bounded, so correct and contained, but that other place existed, between us, in our mutual wanting. In our waiting. For the evenings, when it was time to come out.

I know this. So how can I doubt that other entities or energies are waiting to be summonsed when the time is right? How can I be sure that Yemanjá isn't watching me, disguised in the logo of a multinational coffee brand? Or that Oni isn't waiting to infiltrate my dreams when I least expect her?

University of Cape Town

## Salvador, Bahia

### xi

After dinner, Zé biked her back to the arched doorway of the *Lua Azul* and kissed her. It felt like the most natural thing in the world.

When he leaned forward for the double-cheeked *beijinho*, she raised her face and breathed him in. They stayed a moment, cheeks together. Neither of them pulled back to change sides. Then their lips slid across to meet in the middle.

That first kiss never ended. His lips were salty and sweet, his tongue inquisitive, the scent of his skin – pepper and pine and cardamom –intoxicated her as he pulled her into the dark alcove and they stayed there. The call and response that had started in their conversation continued now as his hands explored, urgent but not hurried, pausing to press the question, responding to the answer in the arch of her hips. His soft moan of discovery enflamed her. She opened like a flower swelled and buoyed by simple desire and a desirable man. More than that, a *goddess loving* man.

Maddy spent her first lunch with Tia Betinha, and many after that one, listening to stories. While she helped in the kitchen, cutting chicken and washing rice, soaking beans and slicing salads, she learned something of the rhythm of the *terreiro*. As in any small community, there was gossip. People came in constantly to consult with Tia B, and since only a thin wall and an open doorway separated the kitchen from the living/dining/consulting room, Maddy felt like she was eavesdropping on a telenovela.

Almeido wanted to apply for a new job and needed the orixás' blessing. Patricia wanted good fortune for her tests at the academy. Rebaldo had asked Sonia to marry him, but the foolish daughter was keeping him on a string – and he would make the perfect son-in-law, so considerate....At times Maddy wasn't sure if they were talking about their own lives, or the latest episode of *Passione* (the current soap favourite that was often on in the background).

But the lives of the orixás, it transpired, were followed just as avidly, retold with as much relish as the soap stories. She learned of Ogun's incestuous longings and his

long exile on the streets, until he was saved by the beautiful *Oxum* – who was also married to his brother, the stubborn hunter Oxossi, who was once drugged and captured by Ossain because he trespassed into his forest; how Logum Ede, child of Oxum and Oxossi, being of a broken home (his parents both so strong willed they could not stay together) was destined to live half his life in the water and half in the forest, and because of this double personality, grew up to be part man and part woman.

She heard how Omolu had been cast out of his home and wandered destitute, begging alms and accompanied only by his faithful dog, scratched by thorns and pitted by pox, until he recovered and was given the gift of healing. When he returned triumphant to his village, he did away with the plague and pestilence that beleaguered it. After that he was welcomed with open arms by all.

It was Omolu's mother, Nanã who brought the mud up from the depths to help Oxalá create human beings (after his experiments with air, bread, stone or fire, oil, water and palm wine had all failed). Smart she may have been, but Nanã was not always compassionate; she hid away her ugly son, Omulu, while she displayed the beautiful child, Oxumarê, up in the heavens for all to see, cloaked in the colours of the rainbow. But melodrama prize had to go to Obá: consumed with jealousy over Oxum, she cut off her own ear and gave it as a gift to her husband, Xangô.

There it all was, the fickleness of human nature. And the stories were threads in the tapestry of the lives of everyone who came to the *terreiro*.

Maddy came to the garden most mornings. They worked together there, planting, pruning, harvesting. She taught him a new grafting technique for soft woods, and he initiated her slowly into the secrets of the plants and the spirits they served. She learned that there were certain days, or certain hours, when you could cut certain plants – depending on for whom you were taking the leaves, and for what purpose. Zé did most of the cutting, offering silent thanks and incantations.

At all times, in the garden, their conduct was chaste and strictly professional.

Outside of the *terreiro* it was different.

They met evenings in 'their' café, on the corner by the square, with the checked tablecloths and the faint whiff of cat. They drank beer and caipirinhas, ate and talked,



ever mindful of their public personas. The rhythm of their interaction became a gentle return and volley, forward and back, forward and back. He would open up and play, then retreat and observe. And whenever he retreated, she found herself wanting to follow, to draw him back out and close to her. When he came in too close, she pulled back just enough for him to retreat like the tide.

There was music everywhere in Salvador. No matter how small the bar, if a band could fit in it there would be playing samba reggae or *chorro*. They danced, crowded in with other bodies, pushed together between a table and a window.

He never came up to her room. They would say their long goodbyes in the shadow of the archway, standing either side on an invisible line she could not see and he would not cross. The only time she tried to ask him why he wouldn't come in he silenced her with his lips. She hadn't known you could get to know a body so well, fully clothed, standing up. She had never known such a wanting inside her.

Whenever she came in from the arches the young night porter bade her an excessively polite goodnight. Was there something of a knowing smirk developing in his pimply mug? Was he mocking her? She mentioned it in passing to Zé one evening across the blue checked tablecloth. That night, instead of leaving her at the arches, he walked her inside. At the bottom of the stairs he asked her to wait, and he walked right up to the reception desk. She never did find out what he said to Sebastian – which, she learned that night, was the boy's name. But from that moment forward, every time she came in late into the evening he lowered his eyes, deferent. But she still felt them following her as she made her way up the steps. She caught him watching her, one time, as she turned on the first floor landing. In his look was an expression hung on a line strung between fear and longing.

Saturday morning Zé took her to Sete Portas, the labyrinthine market that sold herbs and leaves, powders and grains, the beads and candles and effigies of candomblé.

There was kitsch here too – little mini orixá fridge magnets in lacy dresses that reminded her of the Carmen Miranda doll she had had as a child, with the basket of fruit on her head. So languid, so lovely, such a good listener ... but, ultimately, plastic.

As she followed Zé through the maze she was included in all the affectionate greetings he drew – everyone was a darling, a sweetheart, a *querido*. There were kisses and gifts – Maddy was given an extraordinary flower, painted blue.

She found herself becoming possessive of their time together, frustrated when their cosy duo expanded to include Roberto, who joined them for a post-market *feijoada*, to mark the end of the workweek. Every eatery worth its salt would have a version of black bean stew bubbling all day, ready to dish out over white rice, with dark green kale, tomato-and-onion sambal and wedges of orange on the side. And *farofa*, of course. Manioc meal, toasted golden. The waiter knew by now to bring an extra serving to Maddy's table, no matter what she was eating. One day he brought an exaggeratedly big bowl of it, without her asking, to go with her salad; she knew then that she had become a restaurant regular.

Funny how you don't realise you've missed something until you find it again. As a child she used to sprinkle *farofa* on everything. She rediscovered it with every return – along with soft white cheese for breakfast and the sweet perfection of *pudim*, the pooled caramel on top hinting at how close it had come to burning.

They had teased her about her *forofa* infatuation, at her father's house. The teasing was less barbed than Lucia's sardonic jibes about tea. Tea was foreign, manioc was indelibly of here. Maybe all they'd ever wanted from her was a kind of acceptance.

Roberto watched her ladle *farofa* over her beans. 'She eats like a man,' he told Zé. It was true. Maddy had piled her plate high at the buffet. For someone with such a small frame, she could have a monstrous appetite – when she wasn't starving herself. Although that long ago person who had self-harmed felt like someone else entirely.

Zé and Roberto knew each other 'from around'. They moved in competing drumming and capoeira circles, and had an easy bantering rivalry. But because Zé was at such pains to keep their relationship private, Roberto had no idea that they were... what were they? 'Seeing each other'? Roberto seemed to have taken some proprietary interest in her, had already joked to Zé that he had met her first. The memory of her airport exposure still made her feel uncomfortable. Now she felt like a prize in some kind of funfair bean toss, and it was ruining her mood.

'Do you know the one about Jesus and the manioc?'

She waited for Roberto to deliver the punchline, but it turned out it wasn't the start of a joke.

'Tupi legend,' Zé explained.

She wasn't sure she was up for another fairytale.

'The Tupi king's daughter fell pregnant, and insisted she had been with no man,' Roberto began.

'Is this going to put me off my lunch?' She reached for the *farofa* bowl, determined to get her fix before it turned out a princess gave birth to the tuber. Indeed, a white skinned warrior/angel appeared to reassure the young girl that her issue would be a great gift. A beautiful white skinned baby girl was born, but she died very young.

'They named her Mani.'

'Let me guess, Mani, as in, manioc?' She didn't know why she was being so ungracious. Surely not only because Roberto was telling the story, and not Zé?

'Exactly – "House of Mani" because of the white tubers that grew on her grave.'

'Was it the sweet cassava, or the bitter one?' She was being bitter herself. Like the large cassava tuber, full of enough cyanide to be deadly dangerous, if it wasn't soaked and treated correctly before it was cooked.

Roberto just shrugged. 'No idea. It was obviously delicious though.' He watched her spoon yet more *farofa* over her plate.

'They eat a lot of cassava in Africa now, isn't it?' Zé didn't miss a chance to draw the trans-Atlantic connection. 'Especially in Nigeria?'

Maddy could have told them that Africans favoured the larger cassava tuber because it was more drought resistant, and because animals and pests didn't go for its bitter taste. She could have told them the horrible irony that cassava grown in times of drought has higher levels of cyanogenic glucoside – exactly when there is less water available to soak and ferment the tuber properly before eating it. With the result that many poor Africans became ridden with goiter and konzo paralysis, thanks to this gift from the Amazon. It had never really occurred to her before, that perhaps a river tuber was supposed to be eaten by a river?

She settled on a simpler statistic. 'Did you know it takes just 40 mg of pure cassava cyanogenic glucoside to kill a cow?'

After lunch they joined the crowds at the edge of the square watching the capoeiristas. Two by two, the contestants dropped into the circle, summoned by the beat of drums, the call of the berimbau, the response of voices and the poetry of hands.

Maddy never understood how anyone could 'win' a round. It was all so fluid, so consensual, a dance as much as a fight. The partner/opponents eased around each other, looking for an opening. When the strike came it was a feint, anticipated and parried by the other, the energy of the empty blow taken, held, and passed back again. It was hypnotising, the ebb and flow of it. It was alchemy on air.

And then one of the combatants bowed out, and Zé was no longer next to her but dropping into the ring, to shouts of encouragement from some of the spectators. Roberto nudged her. *Watch this.*

She was taken by a mix of pride, amazement and desire as Zé became one of the fluid two. There was a mesmerising power to his grace, tightly contained.

Here was the source of the athleticism she had seen as he moved around the garden.

Ebb and flow.

Zé's opponent swung one leg up in a high kick and Zé crouched down, turning as he ducked underneath it, springing up onto his hands and into a slow cartwheel. He seemed to defy gravity, as he hung, an inverted 'X', then he was up again and thrusting forward. The other stepped back to absorb the 'blow'. Then Zé returned the favour to let him forward and they stepped and rolled, bobbed and weaved like boxers. But instead of putting each other off balance, they were drawing each other in.

Maddy almost couldn't bear to watch.

Then, as if according to some invisible signal, it was finished. Zé rejoined them, pulling off his shirt and using it to wipe his face and the back of his neck. A little rivulet of sweat trickled down the muscles of his stomach and under the braided band. Maddy looked hard at the ground, the grey rounded cobbles, the dust that held them together.

'I'm late,' she heard him tell Roberto. She didn't know he had somewhere to be.

'No problem,' Roberto said. He turned to her. 'I need to get back to the shop. It's on your way. We can walk together?'

She was in the middle of a game of pass the parcel. Only she was the one wrapped up. And with that, with quick sweaty *beijinhos* that didn't slide to the middle, Zé was gone.

Em had a knack for being there when she needed her. An email was waiting when she got back to the *Lua Azul*.

It started, as was custom, with a quote:

*"For the notion of homeland, with all its emotional power, is bound up with the relative brevity of our life, which allows us too little time to become attached to some other country, to other countries, to other languages." - Milan Kundera, 'Ignorance'*

*I am impressed with and amazed by your ability to segue from one culture into another, with such apparent ease, Em wrote. It is a rare talent and one that proves Kundera wrong. (Not for the first time, and surely not for the last.)*

*I sense that you are rekindling real connections in Brazil. Old ones and new ones. This is good.*

*But it also seems to me that being a child of so many countries, while it fosters adaptability, comes with its own perils. Might encourage one to take comfort in unsafe harbours.*

*Any port in a storm, they say. But you, my love, are precious cargo.*

*Tell me my auntly antlers are wrong, but I have a feeling there may be something brewing with this man you are spending so much time with – Jose of the garden? How is that? Is he worthy? (How could he possibly be?)*

*I am, of course, thrilled for you, and your great adventure. I just have to sound a note of caution, don't I? Isn't that my job?*

Maddy imagines the clink of ice as her aunt takes a sip of her own succour.

*Enough! Any minute now I'm going to start wearing purple and reading poetry on street corners. Write me more. You are too, too quiet, in your urban jungle. Think how many letters Bishop managed. Loved the story of the toucan, by the way...*

*And now, enough beating about the bush. All this talk of home is not random or coincidental. Your father wants to know where you are and he has been pestering me. I don't know what's got into him. Old age, guilt, regret – you know better than I how this Catholic thing works. Please just call him. Get him off both our backs.*

*Thank you darling, take care*

*Aunty Em*

*PS 'Homeland' be damned. Home is where the heart is. What I really mean to say is that, come what may, if you ever need to come home, you have one here.*

Oh Em! Her heart filled with love for her aunt. Dear old thing. She felt compelled to dash off a quick acknowledgement. But search as she might, words wouldn't come. For once, she couldn't even conjure a Bishop poem to suit the occasion.

Her aunt so enjoyed looking for subtext and hidden meanings, but communication by quotation could just as easily backfire – two people could look at exactly the same thing, and read something totally different from it. What was brewing with Jose of the Garden? She wished she knew.

And then the line of a song floated up. It was from John Prine's 'Angel of Montgomery' – she liked the version sung by Bonne Raitt the best. *If dreams were thunder, and lightning was desire, this old house would have burned down a long time ago.*

She fired off her reply, pleased with herself for finding a response that also avoided the question. Until she realised she hadn't acknowledged the most important part of the mail. The invitation home. She shot off a P.S. *When I find my red shoes and click my heels together, Aunty Em, the storm will surely blow me back to you. xxxx*

Her taxi driver Fernando spent his off-duty afternoons at a table in a streetside café a few doors down from the pousada. Most often he played solitaire while he waited for fares to call in, but occasionally she had seen him with a group of three or four others.

That's what she was hoping for today. She couldn't shake the uneasy feeling the afternoon had laid over her. But a few hands of poker would see her right.

She was in luck – at least as far as finding Fernando up for a game.

'It cannot be right that three threes and two twos beats an entire royal family.' He complained after she won the first hand. She loved the way he pronounced full house – 'fulause'. She had a feeling she was going to like playing poker in Brazil.

'If only they had all been from the same family,' she consoled him, as he placed a card in front of each of them, and then a second one.

'Pfsh. The *rrroial flesh*,' he said. 'You should know in Brazil we prefer to mix our families up. What you want to do?'

She looked at her cards. A pair of jacks, both black.

'I'm in.'

'My favourites,' he went on, shoving two matches – 10 centavos each – into the middle of the table, 'are the queens.'

'The more the merrier,' she agreed.

'Four queens and I could die a happy man! Although -' he dropped his voice, noted Maddy's call, burned the top card and put three cards face up on the table, 'too many women can be the thing that kills you.'

The flop was scrappy. A five of hearts, an eight of clubs, and a three of diamonds. 'Check.'

'Very good.'

The next card was a queen of hearts.

'There she is, my darling!' he cried. His delight seemed genuine enough. But she was going to call his bluff. She pushed five matches into the middle.

'Okay.' He met her five. 'Let's see how many queens I get today.'

The next card was the nine of clubs.

'Too bad,' Maddy said, pushing everything she had into the middle. 'I'm all in.'

‘You sure?’ Fernando left his cards face down on the table, with the tips of his fingers resting on their blue and white patterned backs. Her pile was much bigger than what he had in front of him.

‘Let’s see what you’ve got.’

He pushed his matches in, and turned over a six and a seven of spades.

She bowed out graciously, as he raked his winnings towards him. ‘You really didn’t think I had the queens?’

‘I was willing to let my jacks bow down to them. It was the inside straight I never saw coming. Thanks Fernando. See you on Monday,’ she scraped her chair back and stood up. Balance had been restored.

University of Cape Town



## **Salvador, Bahia**

### **xii**

Now that the ceremony was not so strange and new, now that she knew some little bit about the orixás, now that she knew and trusted the people here, Maddy became totally entranced.

Not literally. She was never again pulled into an energy as she had been on that first night. No matter how hypnotic the drums, no matter how long the proceedings – and it could take hours for the preliminaries alone to be done, with some 13 orixás, starting with Exu, to acknowledge and honour – she held herself together, and apart. Thus shielded, she got into the groove. And fell in love with Candomblé.

She loved the sense of occasion, the pageantry, the care and seriousness that accompanied each part of the process.

She loved the casual friendliness at the beginning, when the circling women greeted friends on the sidelines, helped each other with a fallen headdress, hurried into the back for some forgotten item, or helped another participant along.

She was allowed to help serve the food. She started learning the small signs and hand signals that showed which orixá was being honoured as the women did their slow circle – the ocean wave motion for Yemanjá, the arrow for Oxossi, the mortar and pestle grind for Ossain.

She was no longer surprised when familiar people – people she shared coffee with or greeted in the courtyard outside – would suddenly drop their heads and go rag-doll limp as one orixá after another incarnated.

She knew that helpers would be there to catch these newly entranced, guide them to a seat (especially old Oxalá), or out of the door, if that's where they needed to go (the wind warrior Iansã tended to wander).

The participants were all 'sons and daughters of the saints' Some of them could fall into trance, the others did not, but helped hold and contain the ceremony.

One moment a person would be circling slowly, to the rhythm of the drum, adding their voice to the call and response of the song. The next minute they spun or shook and then slumped down, eyes closed. They folded their arms back like little bird wings, their mouths worked the thoughts behind their closed eyes, thoughts that were no longer theirs, but came from some other realm. As if they were chewing on the essence of the orixá within them.

Was she suddenly credulous, this hardened atheist? It wasn't about her belief, Maddy told herself, it was about having respect for theirs. Acknowledging that this living, breathing, dancing, circling, enfolding religion existed with a palpable vital force. And held a community together.

A community that had welcomed her without suspicion. A community she was beginning to feel part of.

At the end of the evening, not long before dawn, when all the orixás had been honoured, when all the tourists and the casual onlookers had gone home, when only the faithful (and Maddy) remained, and she was drawn under the huge white sheet, held on its periphery by twelve men, encircling and covering and protecting everyone within it, all of them drawn together into the centre of the hall, pulled by a gentle vortex where orixá and mortal, the entranced and the merely exultantly-tired, all came to rest, Maddy began to understand what it might mean to belong somewhere.

## Salvador, Bahia

### xiii

She gave her slide show talk to a small gathering in the main house. For the first time, she felt she had something to give back to this community. She felt something give, too, in the energy of the evening. As if a circle had opened to let her in. Like coming home.

Mãe Gabriella, was there, and Tia Betinha. Ernesto, of course. Clara with her peroxide halo, Dom Cas and Dona Marta, Zé (naturally), and Luisa, who hardly ever left Mãe Gabriella's side. And who still regarded Maddy with obvious suspicion.

Even Alé and Edge were there. Alé brought Maddy a gift: *Lendes Africanas dos Orixás*, stories compiled by Pierre Verger, with illustrations by Carybé.

The talk went well. They loved the wild dagga story, predictably – Marta wanted to know how it was used as a charm to repel snakes, and Maddy didn't actually know, other than growing it around a homestead. The slide for *Lippia javanica*, said to provide protection from both dogs and crocodiles, showed a picture of Vavi next to a lemon bush, to demonstrate the exception to the rule.

A long diversion about dogs followed – how cute hers was, what was his name, what kind, who was looking after him? All these reminders of that other place, that other life. She felt a twist in her gut, missing Vavi, but pushed it down – way down – almost before she acknowledged it.

The women all nodded when she showed them wormwood – they knew *artemesia afra*'s efficacy for treating menstrual chills. Every person there was interested in the love charms of the fire lily or blood flower, *scadoxus multiflorus*, which Zulu men traditionally used before battle to make them more potent. She avoided Zé's eyes when she showed the photo of the sign next to *Athrixia phylicoides* in the Kirstenbosch garden: *Incholochole tea is believed to have aphrodisiac properties & is not recommended for bachelors.*

Over coffee after her talk, Clara admired the gift from Alé, told her about a book she had written (she'd been too modest to bring a copy along) on the religious lineage of the orixás. Clara had a background in catholic theology, but had no trouble integrating

this with the cosmos of the orixás, with its complex levels of existence. She asked Clara where she stood in the syncretism debate

‘Candomblé is uniquely Brazilian,’ Clara said. ‘Our society is made strong and vibrant because of its hybrid nature, because our followers move between church and *terreiro* with ease. This is what makes it so very powerful. It is both very old, and very new and vibrant.’

One god, or many, or none or all? Did it really matter? *It is very important not to mistake hemlock for parsley*, Diderot said, *but to believe or not believe in God is not important at all*. For the first time since she’d arrived here, Maddy felt the need to confess her atheism. Clara’s response was not judgemental. But the look she gave Maddy conveyed so much compassion it made Maddy feel ashamed.

Clara was one of those people who radiated goodness. She was soft and spectacled, her hair bleached pale orange from years of chemical assault. She had a scholarly absentmindedness, which suggested a constant preoccupation with other realms. Clara told her that Mãe Gabriella was the fifth successor to the 19<sup>th</sup> century founder of the *terreiro*. She had been awarded many honours for her cultural works – she’d started a school for girls, a museum and a library here at the *terreiro*, and spoke out internationally against racism and xenophobia.

Maddy looked over at the formidable woman, head wrapped in a white scarf, torso wrapped in beads, all of her engulfed by her high-backed cane chair. Mãe Gabriella was slight, but strong. She was talking casually with someone Maddy didn’t know, while playing with the hair of a young girl, running the strands between her fingers over and over. The girl leaned back against the old woman’s legs, eyes closed. Maddy imagined what it must be like to be that child, safe there, awash in the chatter of the room with the wise woman’s fingers in her hair.

Zé maintained a casual distance from her the entire evening. Their discretion was iron clad. Now he approached and began to talk to Clara about facilitating a collaboration to document the *terreiro*’s sacred herbs. He turned to Maddy and asked her what she thought of the idea.

More time in the garden, working alongside Zé? She thought about possible academic scholarships at local universities. All in a moment, forty days opened out into a possible future.

She said she thought it was a wonderful idea.

The following morning there was a new playfulness to the work with Zé. Inspired by her talk, he said, he showed her a plant called angelicó, or ‘a thousand men’. ‘I will keep you away from this one,’ he teased. ‘Except for when you have acid in the stomach.’ The vine had heart-shaped leaves and the most extraordinary flowers. Part labiate, part funnel, part flapping elephant ear, with a tumescent proboscis. Its green fruit hung pendulous and testicular. No prizes for guessing why the *Aristolochia Gigantea brasiliensis* was considered an aphrodisiac and used for *magia do amor*.

Bigger than her hand, the flowers reminded her of giant dishevelled bats. Their colour – a stippled lime white on deep maroon – was like a translucent slice of marbled kobe beef, blown up through a microscope to show its repetitive fractal.

As if to balance such intense male energy, Zé showed her Iansã’s ‘fire leaf’, its red tapered fronds covered with a fuzzy pubescence. The atmosphere became so torpid in that garden she was almost relieved when the school bell signalled the end of their morning’s work.

Before she left he wished her luck. There was no lunch with Tia Betinha that day. Mãe Gabriella had summoned her.

## Salvador, Bahia

### xiv

‘She is waiting for you,’ Luisa stood up from her desk in the small shop. ‘I will tell her you are here.’ Disapproval oozed from the woman as she brushed past. What on earth had Maddy done to piss her off?

She hadn’t been back inside the shop since that first day. This time she saw things very differently. She could pair the beads with their proper deities, for one thing. And she knew the authors of some of the books. One of them was Clara’s collection of columns written for the local newspaper, *A Tarde*. Each recounted a conversation with Mãe Gabriela – on the nature of faith, syncretism, the orixás in the body. ‘What we know for sure,’ Maddy read ‘is that our body is a temple through which we give thanks to our orixás...’

She was still holding the book when a small voice from behind said, ‘My aunty wrote that.’ A petite, beautiful little girl, no more than four or five, with braids to her shoulders fastened with yellow beads. Her school uniform was brushed with the dust of the playground, her knees were scuffed, and on one there was an X where two cartooned Band-Aids intersected. Luisa returned at that moment and the girl rushed to throw her arms around her legs. ‘Mama!’

‘Liliana,’ she told the girl, ‘did you say hello to our visitor from Africa? This is Dona Magdalena.’

‘Prazer,’ the girl mumbled into her shirt collar. She was no longer commander of this situation, now the grownups had appropriated it.

‘Mãe Gabriella is ready for you,’ Luisa told Maddy. She seemed less antagonistic – perhaps she was softened by the presence of her daughter.

She didn’t know what it meant, the way the cowrie shells fell, their pattern on the mat. Up or down, open or closed. Towards the centre of the woven circle, or running away off towards the outer edges.

The mãe-de-santo seemed to spend an inordinately long time studying them, incanting words and phrases so fast that Maddy could only pick up snatches. There were other things in the space between them. A grey stone pestle in a wooden mortar worn almost flat from use. A string of beads, alternating red and white, lying slightly separate from a coil of other colours. Herbs floating in water in a ceramic bowl. Maddy tried to figure out what they were, before they were ground and mixed, but she could only guess. She detected a whiff of anise and suspected *Pimpinella anisum* somewhere in the mix.

She was so immersed in olfactory guesswork that she had to ask Mãe Gabriella to repeat the question.

‘Have you found what you need?’

Had she? It was true that she had not yet found her *Newbouldia*. But that probably wasn’t what the mãe-de-santo meant.

They had talked a bit, when she first came in, about Maddy’s time in the garden. Her afternoons with Tia Betinha. ‘We get many visitors here,’ Mae Gabriella said. ‘A lot of people with a lot of curiosity. Some of those people want to stay on, join our community. But this is not a small decision. The proper initiation is a long one.’

Seven years long, in fact. Three years and then another four, if you are *iyawo*, one chosen to receive the orixás in trance.

‘And there are those,’ the mãe-de-santo went on, ‘who help us to do our work out in the world, through research and education, explaining the ways of candomblé. A religion of faith. Not a cult. Not a collection of fairy tales. A religion based on love and pride of our people. You understand this.’

Then she had picked up the handful of cowries and said, ‘It is time, to see what the *buzios* say we should do with you.’

Now the mãe-de-santo had broken her silence with an unanswerable question. But she was not waiting for Maddy. She had her own answer. She reached into a mound of beads and pulled out one strand. The beads unfurled, cascading from a loose pile into a long string. Of all the colours in the room next door, these were the ones she had admired the most. The beads of Yemanjá.

Mãe Gabriella placed the beads in the bowl of herbs, along with the red and white string. She motioned for Maddy to shift closer, and began to swirl the water, calling on the orixás, speaking the words of blessing.

Maddy allowed the mãe-de-santo to put the turquoise beads around her neck. ‘She is the mother of all, queen of queens. She is a fierce protector.’ There were more words that Maddy couldn’t make out.

Yemanjá. So the Mãe had chosen this orixá for her? Or perhaps it is the deity that does the choosing. A mother for this motherless child. She saw Aphrodite in the clam shell. She saw the cartoon on the tuna can – ‘Chicken of the Sea’. When she was very small she thought that mermaids lived inside that squat round tin. She burst into inconsolable tears one day, on seeing the empty tin can, opened, and a bowl of flaked tuna salad in a clear bowl next to it, bits of onion and red pepper caught up in the flesh and mayonnaise. She had never really liked tuna, after that.

She went through a phase of being obsessed with Hans Christian Andersen’s Little Mermaid. The original tale was a horror story of female self-sacrifice; the mermaid princess gives up her tongue and dances through the agony of pins and needles just to be close to the man she loves. She doesn’t get him, in the end. In the end, she gets martyrdom. And a lifetime – if one can call it that – of insubstantiality. Not even spirit, just foam on the sea.

Then Mãe Gabriella was telling her about the ritual cleanses she would need to undergo, starting today.

‘Ask Luisa to give you some Alfazema oil when you leave. You will need to use it every day.’

She was still in a daze as she paid Luisa for the oil, which she had ready and waiting for her. Had Luisa been listening at the door? The beads felt cold and slightly clammy against her neck and chest. They had not yet had time to take up the warmth of her body.

The young girl, Liliana, was sitting at the table, nose pressed into a homework book. As Maddy left she looked up briefly and smiled. She had a charming little crease in her top lip. She obviously didn’t get that smile from her mother – although it was hard to know. Whenever she’d seen Luisa’s lips they were pursed in disapproval.



‘Go with God,’ she said as Maddy left. Which could be taken as an affectionate farewell. But Maddy couldn’t help feeling it as a threat.

University of Cape Town

## Salvador, Bahia

### xv

She had to face Luisa again, unexpectedly, when she and Zé walked back to the *Lua Azul* after dinner.

His bike was in the shop, getting a tune up to ready it for their trip to Cachoeria the next week. He had some business there – herbal, she assumed. And there was something there, he said, that he wanted to show her.

She was looking forward to getting out of the city. But right now she was enjoying this rare, slow walk home through the streets – much as she usually looked forward to riding behind him, slipping her hands underneath his shirt, letting the breeze lift her hair, holding tight over the cobble-wobble.

Tonight was dark, the gibbous moon curtailed by a heavy gathering of cloud. He saw the scrappy crossroad offering before she did, and took her elbow to angle her quickly away across the street. Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed candles, red and black, a bottle with some leaves – or were they feathers? – sticking out of the top. And what looked like a plate of raw flesh.

‘There are some who believe you shouldn’t speak with him at all, but I don’t fear him. It is just bad when I forget him.’ She knew him well enough by now to know that he was talking about Exu. She felt a little superstitious shiver as he pressed close and adjusted his step to match her stride. He slipped his hand down to hold hers.

She thanked Exu, silently, for a perfect moment. The feel of his hand, in the street, dry and warm despite the clammy heat. The flow of their bodies, walking together, in step. She felt buoyed, light. Lighter than air.

Then they rounded the corner and almost stumbled over Luisa and a girlfriend sitting in the doorway of a hole-in-the-wall snack bar. They sat on stackable plastic chairs, with a polystyrene Skol beer cooler box as a makeshift table between them.

All this Maddy took in during the moment it took Zé to mutter ‘*Merda!*’, drop her hand as if it were white-hot and in one swift side step put an acre of space between them.

Luisa and her friend occupied their sidewalk station as if it were a command post; it gave them a good view of everything going on in the street and the square at its lower end. Luisa's friend must be the patron; she had her feet up on the skol box, and the two of them had the air of regulars, watching the daily drama play out before them in their extended living room.

Liliana was nowhere to be seen, but Maddy heard the little girl's name in the rapid-fire exchange that took place between Zé and Luisa. She couldn't follow all of it, but the tone was heated. She focussed her eyes on the deep-fried snacks behind the grimed glass of the chrome display. Luisa's friend stared with frank curiosity at Maddy the entire time, but didn't offer the customary greeting. Luisa didn't acknowledge her presence at all.

'She doesn't like me,' Maddy said when they had put enough silent distance between them and the scene.

'She just wants to protect me,' Zé said.

'Oh?'

'We have known each other since we were very young. Our families go back.' He is rolling his hand in front of him, to indicate a long, long time. 'She is like... a sister.'

Maddy knew Zé was a child of the *terreiro*. His mother had been a domestic worker, his father unknown to him. He had played in the *terreiro* courtyards and garden as a child, until he was ordained to serve it. If Luisa had a similar history, she would naturally be suspicious of outsiders.

'Well, it seems your sister is jealous.'

He stopped her then, in the middle of the street, pulled her to him and kissed her long and hard.

'Forgive me,' he murmured into her hair.

But she didn't know, yet, what for.

That night, for the first time, he came up to her room. They sat on the small balcony overlooking the industrial bay and took turns drinking from a bottle of cheap 69 cachaça. The small bulge of moon was completely hidden now, and there lightning played on the water in the far distance.

She told him about how the lightning took her mother, and of a lifetime of waiting for it to claim her too. Despite the heat of the cachaça in her blood, she had started to shiver.

‘I believe you are a child of Xangô,’ he said. Nodding at the beads around her neck, he added, ‘As well as Yemanjá. There is another story I would like to tell you. But first ... come to bed.’

They undressed without shyness, their growing familiarity edged with anticipation. He unclasped his *umbigeira* from around his waist, rolled it up and put it carefully on the small side table. He motioned to her to do the same with her beads. She already felt strangely naked without them, but already strangely right being naked next to him.

Beads and grass. The way they had fallen on the round table they looked like the two halves of the yin-yang, the seed inside of each representing the necessary potentiality of the other.

He watched her from across the room, lean and burnished in the moonless dark, his body already familiar after weeks of watching and wanting. Now she closed her eyes and gave herself over to the feel of him. Lost herself in pepper, and cardamom and pine.

There are smells that flirt around the nostril – sharp, astringent smells that sit high up on the pituitary gland. Most citruses. The buchu, and Cape May. And there are those that you take in deeper, absorb into the back of the throat. Smells that penetrate into your glands and work deep down on your limbic system. Zé’s was one of those smells.

Afterwards, she lay spooned against him with her head on his arm as he told the story. One hand buried itself in her hair, the other played over her breasts.

It had, of course, to do with Xangô. Like many of the orixás, Xangô had been mortal before he became a deity. In his earthly life he was a great magician and warrior. It was only after he committed suicide that he entered *Orun*, the nine-levelled realm of the orixás.

So it seemed even gods have death wishes. Until they become immortal – at which point a death wish is beside the point. ‘Is there supposed to be a moral in that story?’ she asked him.

‘Does there have to be?’ he was stroking her hair. ‘Some things just are, because they are. It is their nature. You cannot change it, you just accept it.’

‘Or go mad.’

‘Even that,’ he said, pulling her closer, ‘is an option.’

He held her and let her cry out her grief, and her relief.

University of Cape Town

## In Transit

### IV

Dreams are like memory. Or maybe it's the other way around.

Two points of view split at the place where you see yourself and are at the same time the one doing the seeing. You are *in* the scene, right in the centre of it, watching events from your own perspective. But you're also aware of yourself on the outside, dreaming in.

If you had to draw this it would look like one of those Boolean diagrams, a math tree branch. Except that Boolean is a kind of binary logic – true or false, yes or no, 0 or 1 – whereas dreamscape defies logic. In dreams, all possibilities coexist simultaneously. Dreams allow *infinite* possibilities – especially conflicting ones – to all feel true. Even when you know that at least some of them have to be false.

And then there are lucid dreams. The kind where you know you are dreaming, but still you are asleep.

I'm only semi-conscious of the 'real' world outside – the muffled voices, the hot plastic faux-leather bench seat sweating under my cheek. The smell of coffee, making me feel sick. Maybe I've finally had too much of it. Or maybe I really am getting sick. I can't believe I fell asleep *again*. I guess I do have a lot of sleep to catch up on. All those late nights. Those busy, busy nights. And the craziness of the last few days.

This time when his face appears, I can't stop it. Those lips, the thought of what they do to me, actually makes me ache. Think of something else. Green. Think of green. A green river.

I'm coursing through the jungle on a river. I'm flying over fields of sugar cane, endless spears of bright green, light green, over carpets of dark coffee leaf dotted with bean, swooping down on fat, flat tongues of tobacco. Now I'm underwater, flying over seabeds. Seaweed swaying in a sea breeze. I could go for some seaweed right now. I can taste it – salt and brine and iodine. Chlorophyll, flat and green.

I try to tame it into sushi, slice it and wrap it tight around rice and slivers of tuna and pink umeboshi, the seaweed keeps unfurling, uncurling, it slips way from me, wet and long and waving, and now I'm swimming in a swaying jungle of the stuff.

The sea is the mother of everything. We carry the seas within us, just as we carry the stars, elemental in our DNA. Mermaids are reminders of where we come from, in this underwater womb. But that's no mermaid, that's Yemanjá, sitting on the seabed, her hair braided and beaded with cowry shells, floating like Medusa's. She is ordinary and magnificent, flesh and magic. Her iridescent skirts aren't out of place, drifting gently with the currents. I almost wonder whether there are gills there, underneath the petticoats. But then I don't, because she is looking at me with those eyes. Those orixá eyes, deep sea green eyes, are fixed on me. They are fierce. Piercing. Are they judging? Is that malice? Have I done something wrong? The panic flutters deep in my belly and when I clutch at my money belt I am back amid the voices and the vinyl.

I sit up and I swear the air smells of sulphur and iodine.

And coffee. I really do think I'm going to be sick.

I go through my things, just to get calm. I should get another money belt, but this one has been with me for so long. We've been so many places together, this faded blue denim and me, it's like a talisman. This zip that always catches just there, always makes me panic that I won't be able to get what I need out when I need it. Passport, tickets, money. Check, check, check. Lucky poker chip. Lip-ice. Emergency tampon.

And there's the secret pocket at the very back, flush against my belly. I planned all along to carry some seeds there, if I found any. If I found the last known stand of *Newbouldia mundii* in the world.

After all this time this bag's crescent shape feels like part of my body. Fanny pack, some people call it. I really hate that. Better to call it a moon bag. Crescent moon. Blue moon. My blue moon bag.

What were the chances of having a blue moon month while staying at a place called the *Lua Azul*? Some things you just can't plan. I could try to work out the probabilities, but ... I get lost counting the days. There were two full moons. Filling, full; waning, empty. Then filling again, waxing to perfectly rotund and then – now – emptying again.

Two full moons, with nothing in between.

I'm still holding the tampon in my hand and it looks at me like an accusation.

Oh shit.

University of Cape Town



## Salvador, Bahia

xvi

It rained for three days and three nights. It was no time to be in the garden, but they made the most of their time indoors.

Three days, three nights.

During the nights, stories and dreams, past present and future all tangled up with sheets and sweat and skin.

The days felt interstitial, pauses in what was really important. What was really real.

But those three suspended days were hardly uneventful.

The first day, they hid from the world. On the second, Zé went off to make sure the bike repairs would be done in time for their trip to Cachoeira that weekend, and Maddy decided to devote the day to reading and correspondence.

The pelting rain outside her room was distracting her from *Dona Flor*, as were the sheets, wafting pepper and musk. They arranged to meet later at the '*Beija Flor*', with its blue and white tablecloths and its painted hummingbird over the door. 'That place told me to kiss you, from that first day,' he teased, before he left that morning. She wanted to ask him what had taken him so long, but she knew that everything was playing out exactly right, in its true time. If anything ever happened, he said, suddenly serious, if she ever needed him, she should wait there for him. And he would come. *Para beijar minha flor*. To kiss his flower.

Her email inbox is brimming with messages from Kirk, each more insistent than the next. Since their last telephone conversation, she has been avoiding his calls too. Her last email to him was one word long: 'Paperwork?'

His latest salvos seemed to be an attempt at emotional blackmail. One email subject read 'Drug enhances efficacy of chemotherapy', followed by a URL link to a scientific paper. 'We should be leading this charge,' his message said. She didn't click on the link. They were in the business of saving plants, not people. Although the latter would, inevitably, follow from the former. If only more people understood that.

His latest mail was more blunt. 'Time's nearly up,' it said. 'What gives?'

She arranged a lunch with Ernesto for the next day. She knew there was nothing much he could do to help her, in the absence of a star seed, but it would at least give Kirk the impression that she was pushing forward, should he have any contact with Ernesto. Plus she was fond of the old man. She realised she was just buying time. But time for what? What was she actually doing here now? Apart from avoiding people?

Among the messages she was ignoring were two more from her father.

University of Cape Town

## Salvador, Bahia

### xvii

‘And how are you getting on my dear? Wait - ’ Ernesto reached into a soft leather briefcase and pulled out a feather – deep black, tinged with blue, its quill looking like it had been dipped in blue ink. ‘A gift from Lupe. He told me he wanted you to have it.’ He delivered the feather into her hand with a wink.

‘Thank you.’ She wished she could wear it *cacique*-style, in her hair.

It felt strange to be at the restaurant without Zé. She realised maybe she should have chosen another place when the waiter approached with their beers and menus and asked, ‘Will Sr. Zé be joining you today?’ Perhaps he was acting out of loyalty, sending a message to Ernesto – *this one is taken*. Did he have any idea what kind of brew he was stirring? Did she? She stroked the feather. Its determined directionality was comforting.

Ernesto poured a glass for each of them and paused to raise his in salute before taking a long pull on it. ‘To African queens.’

‘I have to admit I sometimes feel something of a charlatan, being welcomed here as an African.’

‘Where do you think you are from then?’

‘I was born here, in the Amazon,’ she said. ‘My mother was born in Africa, but by way of Scottish Byrne settlers who arrived in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. God knows what they did to secure the land they lived on, who they had to push aside.’

‘Guilt is the curse of the coloniser.’ His comment carried no blame that she could see. ‘What about your father?’

‘My father’s people were Italian American.’

‘A noble Roman line.’

‘Perhaps. But he grew up living over the family’s pizza joint in New Jersey.’ Even America, land of opportunity and immigrants, had been cut into patchwork pieces, the indigenous peoples made into the stuffing of the quilt. Or worse, the ticking. She

looks again at the feather, thinks of the Native Amerindians who would prize it. 'What I mean is, I guess my hybridity is not so obvious.'

'Mãe Gabriella believes that deep inside, you are an African,' he said. 'That's what she sees in you. Or do you believe traits come only through the blood line?'

'She said that?'

Ernesto nodded.

'I don't really know. I mean, I believe in strength in diversity – you only have to look at monoculture in plants to see what it does to the soil, the ecology – I believe we are supposed to mix and merge and share and hybridise...it keeps the gene pool strong.'

'And now you are not enough African for us?'

She shrugged. She only knew she felt more comfortable here – among Brazil's transformed African culture, than she ever did in Africa itself.

'In Brazil we all speak the same language, which helps. But the Portuguese are still the butt of all our jokes.'

'So we can all love one another, as long as we have an "other" to unite against?'

'Inconsistencies exist only in the minds of non-believers.'

He picked up the feather, ran his fingers along its shaft, smoothing its hairs. 'In the end it is not bloodline or skin colour that counts. Nor is it even intention. It is action.'

Their food arrived – feijoada for him, a *caldo verde* soup for her, with some manioc fries on the side. Comfort food.

'So, how goes it with your mission?' She couldn't remember exactly when Ernesto had dropped the pretence that she was there on some kind of cultural-medicinal exchange, but he'd taken an avid interest in her seed ever since he first heard about it.

'I haven't found the plant, let alone any seeds.'

'If you can look at the seeds of time and tell which grains will grow and which will not...'

She looked at him blankly.

'Macbeth.'

Great. That was all she needed. Witches and ghosts.

'You might still find it,' he told her, sprinkling *farofa* liberally over his rice and beans. Would think her crazy if she put some in her soup?

Even if she did find it, she told him, there were protocols to follow, in terms of transporting seeds across international borders. But it is Mãe's permission that would be the most important for her.

And as she said it, she realised it was true.

He shrugged. 'If you think my word will carry weight with Mãe Gabriella you are mistaken,' he said. 'And perhaps you should not be worried about official channels. There are other voices you should listen to.' He looked pointedly at her beads, just visible under the neckline of her t-shirt. 'Also, it seems to me that the seed is not in danger, if it has survived here quietly for a few hundred years, no? It is your mission that is in danger.'

He had her there. Hypothetically speaking.

'Those trees have survived here because they have developed deep roots. It is what allows them to grow tall. And they are protected in a way they wouldn't be anywhere else.'

'You talk as if these trees exist. I haven't found any.'

'You have not finished looking.' He pushed his plate away. 'But should you find any, my hands will be – how do you say? – tied up.' Ernesto searched the middle distance as the capoeira music starts up in the square. 'Where are your roots, Magdalena?'

Of course, she cannot answer. For the same reason that she can't give a clear answer when people hear her accent and ask her where she was from. 'Transatlantic mish-mash,' she always says. Any other response seems too complicated.

'Our friend Elizabeth said something very wise,' he offered. 'It was not on a story or a poem, but in a letter – I can't remember who it was to.'

'Robert Lowell, probably.'

'Very likely,' he nods. She can't help thinking how much he would like her aunt. And, possibly, vice versa. 'Or perhaps it was something she wrote for herself, in a notebook. I cannot remember – it is a long time since I have taught English literature. But I do remember the exact words. She said: "Sometimes it seems as though only intelligent people are stupid enough to fall in love, and only stupid people intelligent enough to let themselves be loved."'

The sun was glaring outside, coming in under the umbrella from the sides and glancing off the white of the table cloth. It was a relief to have the glare blocked by shadow. Until she looked up -

‘Hello Maddy.’

- into the face of her father.

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## Salvador, Bahia

### xviii

After a brief introduction, Ernesto excused himself without waiting for coffee. Her father pushed aside the remnants of feijoada and sat in his place.

‘I’ve been looking all over for you.’

His handsome face had softened in the long years since she’d last seen him, but it was still a face that could turn heads. He’d gone a little fleshy around the jaw, his hair had more salt than pepper now, and the swarthy skin was mottled. She focused on these details so that she didn’t really have to *look* at him. Because when she looked at the whole of him, he seemed to have shrunk. It was as if his essence had sunk somewhere into himself. Diminished. It frightened her.

‘Aren’t you a little bit glad to see me?’

He had grey tufts growing out of his ears. She was sure he never used to have those.

‘I’m sorry.’ She wanted to cry. She wanted nothing more than *not* to cry. ‘How did you find me?’

‘Em said you were staying in Pelourinho. So I called up all the *pousadas* until I found yours. Then when you wouldn’t take my calls...’ Neither of them talked while the waiter cleared the plates from the table. He ordered a coffee. ‘I knew you were getting my messages. That young porter told me.’ Thanks a lot, Sebastian. ‘When the mountain won’t come to Mohammed....’

‘You know I don’t do Biblical very well.’

There was so much in his smile. So much pain, so much knowing. So much that she knew. So much of *her*. And, she realised with a painful gut twist, so much love. ‘So I hung around outside the *Lua Azul* long enough for you to come out alone.’

‘You’ve been *stalking* me?’

‘You left me no choice.’

She had to admit she was a little bit flattered that he would go to all the trouble.

‘That’s just too weird, even for you.’

“‘Even for me?’ What am I, some kind of villain?”

His eyes creased and she realised that the grimace she pulled must have looked like a smile. Even after the light had gone out of his eyes, his smile still said, 'I know where the fun is. Come over to my side and I'll show you.' Who could resist that? Not many did.

The waiter brought their coffees and saved her from having to answer him. Everyone wants to be on the good side. *We are not the bad guys*, Kirk said. Now her father. *What am I, some kind of villain?* Where do they get their sense of certainty?

'Do you remember that road trip we did? Just after?' He doesn't have to say *what* it was after. They share only one event in their lives that never gets talked about, but colours every word that passes between them. One that they circle and circle.

She remembered black asphalt ribboning through the autumn colours, and music. The orange and yellow and red of oak and elm and ash. Of sassafras, sycamore and aspen. Dogwoods and horsechestnuts. The sweet promise of the sugar maple. She was seized with a physical longing to be standing in crisp, cool sight of them, breathing in the beautiful smell of decay as the season turned. The way it would be turning soon.

Talk about *saudades*.

'I remember you had that golden oldie radio station on. Blasts from the pasts, they called it.' It was all Elton John, Hendrix, John Paul George and Ringo, both Bobs, the Stevies (Nicks and Wonder). Every now and again her dad would tell her, 'This song came out the year you were born', or 'I remember you were three, when...'

He never mentioned her mother in these reminiscences, not once.

It felt strange to be sitting up in the front, rather than in the back with her chin wedged between the seatbacks so she could be part of the conversation. There wasn't much talking that time. There was too much to say. Still, it was good to be with him. Just the two of them.

And then Melanie went and spoiled it all. When her warbling voice came on, all Edith Piaf in the French bits, singing '*Look what they've done to my song, Ma...*' Maddy's father became unreachably quiet. They were almost at the turn, but when they reached the sign that read 'Fallow Farm' he touched the brakes, slowed, then broke, choked and accelerated away.

She couldn't remember what song was playing when he finally stopped a few miles on, at a great orange pumpkin and apple cider stand. She concentrated on herding



other people's leftover crumbs into the steel siding of the Formica table tops while her father sipped black coffee and said absolutely nothing. She wanted to ask him why they hadn't turned into the farm road. She had a bag packed in the trunk of the car. He'd put it in right next to his when they left Aunt Em's that morning. They were going to catch hold of some memories, he said.

He didn't put the radio on again when they got back into the car. They drove in silence all the way back to New York. Maddy fell asleep and woke up to a bridge of lights over the Hudson, long strings, white on the left, red on the right. Snow White and Rose Red. The swish of tires through damp streets.

She had been looking forward to seeing the pond. It had tadpoles in summer, was frozen solid in winter, hard enough to venture out on, brave and scared. The first horse she ever sat on lived there. Apples in barrels, and cider in season. Fallow Farm.

But there was too much of her mother there.

Her father didn't even stay when he dropped her at Em's that night. When she woke up in the dark the hot water bottle Em always tucked in with her was still warm. There was a dent in the bed where her aunt sat, shuddering with silent sobs. Em was stroking her foot, Maddy could feel the pressure of her hand on top of the covers, pressing and releasing, over and over and over. Maddy was too scared to move, too scared to open her eyes, lest she be frozen forever at the sight of so much grief.

'You look so much like her,' her father said now. 'The older you get....'

'Catching memories, you called it. That trip. Is that why we didn't ever get there, to the farm?'

'Did I?' He was swirling the last dregs of coffee in the bottom of his cup, as if hoping to divine something in there. 'I supposed I did. I couldn't go back,' he said. 'It all reminded me. *You* reminded me.'

'Maybe *I* needed those memories.' *Maybe I needed to be more than a memory.*

'I know. I fucked up. I'm sorry. That's why I'm here.'

'You have a genie bottle to grant us some wishes and make it all different?'

She wanted to take back her words. It was as if, with every one she uttered, she drained more of his essence. Vampire words. They made him smaller. They made her meaner.

‘Are you okay?’ It occurred to her that they could be having one of those life-changing conversations. He looked so very tired. ‘I mean, is everything...’

He motioned for the waiter to bring a refill.

‘I’m fine,’ he said, when his cup was full. ‘I just wanted to see you.’ He reached into his shirt pocket. ‘And I wanted to give you this.’ He pushed a thick white envelope across the table. Her name was written on it, in blue pen.

‘What is it?’ She didn’t pick it up. Instead she poured too much sugar into her cup.

‘It’s not a genie in a bottle. But I thought it might help...’

‘I think we may be beyond help.’ Being too hard was the only way she knew how not to feel soft.

‘Guess we’re just destined to keep on picking up where we left off then.’ He watched the *capoeiristas* for a while. ‘What happened to the little girl with the stuffed orangutan – what was his name?’

‘Og.’

‘Who loved chocolate and fairground rides?’

*She died of loneliness.*

‘You always used to love the fast ones.’

‘You never came on them with me.’

‘I watched from the side, to make sure you were alright.’ So this was what he needed; to feel like he had been some kind of benevolent protector, had not simply absconded for all those years. No matter how drastically it differed from the truth.

And if there was another kind of truth lurking somewhere there she was suddenly too bone tired to look for it.

The *capoeiristas* were fainting and ducking. She wished they could parry like that, she and her father. But it always felt, after they met, that they had exchanged physical blows. Sticks and stones ... whoever said that words could never hurt you?

He was looking her over now with a kind of hunger. Taking what he could from her. He saw the beads. Reached out as if to touch them.

‘Are these what I think they are? I thought you didn’t do religion –’

She slapped his hand away. The sharp sting of skin on skin was a shock. This was so wrong.

‘What gives you the right?’ The violence of her own anger surprised her.

And it was as if all the fight had gone out of him. Suddenly he looked very, very old.

‘When are you going to forgive me Maddy? I didn’t kill her, and neither did the lightning. Your mother was always her own worst enemy.’

University of Cape Town

## In Transit

### V

The airport pharmacy has those mirrors that double, triple, and quadruple your reflection. If I stand just so, and look out of the corner of my eye, I can see myself refracting back and back and back, smaller and smaller and smaller.

It seems that a DIY pregnancy test isn't a big sell item in transit. I can't find one on the shelf, but when I ask the assistant she pulls a box out from behind the counter. There is so much unspoken between us as she hands it to me. Results in three minutes, it says. Just pee on the stick.

Three minutes. Hell, I've got three hours to kill. I've got the whole of the rest of my life.

*Your mother took her own life. And I was as devastated as you.*

I knew it all along. And yet I didn't know it. I haven't quite figured out how that is possible. How you can put something away, dead and buried, inside yourself. And then just forget it's even there.

But now I remember. It's as if a big chunk of the story was torn out of the book, and the pages have suddenly been recovered and put back in their right place. Now I remember very clearly how we all came down the hill, out of the lightning. Three of us. How we made it home safe, glad of the rubber wheels in the little hire car. How Grandma hurried me past the Black-eyed-Susans and into a warm bath. I remember Pears soap. She always had Pears soap, but I think I remember it that day, especially.

Dizzy. I lean on the *farmácia* counter, waiting for my change, thinking it's funny how I've been trying so hard not to think about Zé, not to think about my father. I've spent my whole life thinking/not thinking about my mother. Now there's something else to think about. How am I going to pretend this away?

After the close call of that last lightning strike, my father ignored my mother's advice not to carry me. He just picked me up and started running down the hill. He called her to follow, and didn't look back. But I did. I watched over his shoulder and I saw her standing there, receding. Her arms were spread out wide, inviting the lightning. That blue

aura was there, all around her. I definitely saw that. But was it real, or part of my imagination?

She was always crying, that holiday. 'I'm just blue, baby' she kept telling me, when I asked her why she couldn't stop.

She was so quiet in the car, going home. Maybe she was disappointed to have made it down alive. I was put to bed and the next morning my mother was gone.

She left a note. They found the hire car in that same Natal Parks Board parking lot. She had gone back up the same hill. *She's with the dragons now*, my father told me. And then he was gone too.

The fights we had when I was sixteen, all the fights we've had since then, they were never about our different standpoints, or points of principle. They weren't about being people- rather than eco-centric, or about thoughtless habitat destruction in the name of development. They were about him leaving me, when I needed him most.

But then I guess he knew that, all along.

And just because it was said, now, didn't change anything.

Did it?

The assistant hands me my change and I put it back in my money belt next to the letter my father handed me at the *Beija Flor*. I still haven't opened it. I thought maybe I would read it on the plane, when there was no turning back.

I used to see so much irony in the fact that he built dams for a living. I don't know anyone else who's so good at holding back their grief.

With the possible exception of myself.

There are those who say we have no history left, that the world has become an endless shallow parody of self-reflection. Leaving the pharmacy I catch sight of myself again, the long refraction. Will I ever break out of this hall of mirrors?

Two more minutes, and I'll have my answer. Two blue lines will change everything. Only one line, and things remain the same.

The cubicle is cramped, but it won't do to go walking around the ladies waving the white stick in the air. I have no interest in attracting a crowd of women to congratulate or commiserate.

I've always been so careful. We were so careful, Zé and me. Next to the river. Between our tangled sheets. Surely this is not possible? All those years of reproductive paranoia, years of pills and coils, of rubber rather than risk. After Nick I wanted to give my body a break. What a relief to ditch the pills, let my body tune into its natural rhythm.

But this?

How could I possibly be ready for this?

University of Cape Town

## Salvador, Bahia

### xix

Maddy woke up alone. After Zé left early, she had turned over, curled up foetal in the space he left in the warm sheets, and slipped into the realm of dreams.

Her mother often visited her there. But she wasn't the one who came that morning.

Instead, Maddy dreamed Zé's great grandmother, Oni.

Maddy knows it's her. In the way of dreams, she was at both the centre and the periphery of the story. Weaving the story, and receiving it.

The path was choked with greenery, the going was slow. She had walked some way before she came upon Oni sitting quietly in a dark clearing, on the other side of a small stream. To reach her, Maddy had to cross by way of stepping stones. She had to look down at her feet as she went, careful not to slip. At the same time, she could see the woman watching her every step. Willing her to make it across safely – or willing her to fall.

They spoke without words. Oni was a woman of middle years, whose fierceness lent her the vigour of someone much younger. Maddy pleaded with her, silently. But the woman was resolute. When she shook her head, the cowrie shells braided into her hair shook, emphatic. Whatever the question was, her answer, unequivocal, was 'no'.

When Maddy woke up for the second time the sun was high and the clouds were clearing. She spent some moments allowing the images to settle, allowing her eyes to focus on the here and now, this room. Her beads lay coiled on the dresser, next to the envelope from her father, unopened.

What was it that Maddy had wanted from Oni? Some kind of permission? She did not remember. But she knew that she could not disobey the woman. That much was absolutely clear. So much so that Maddy hardly felt disappointed to give up whatever it was she had wanted. If anything, she was relieved; the decision had been taken out of her hands.

She had a shower and three cups of tea – that was the last of her Five Roses teabags – and still she couldn't shake the strange dream. Or visitation. She was not even sure what to call it.

She felt like she was straddling two worlds. Maybe more. Maybe nine. But only Iansã can do that.

When he told her about Xangô's mortal death, Zé explained about the nine levels of the spirit world, arranged like concentric circles around this physical one. The high god, Olórun, resides at the most powerful, and most inaccessible, outer layer; the realm of infinity. The orixás dwelt in the realm closest to humans, incarnating through their devotees during trance.

Of all the orixás, only Iansã, the warrior wind goddess, had the ability to traverse all the levels of *Orun*, from the one closest to humans to the outermost realms. But the dead were scattered among all of the nine realms. Maddy wondered whether they might break the rules, sometimes, and hitch a ride in on our dreamtime.

Through her friends in Cape Town who were sangomas, she knew about the dream that initiates wait for – usually of an animal totem – so that they can become fully *twasa'd*.

But she doesn't want to integrate to this degree. She just wants her seeds. Hers is a mission of science, not spirituality.

*As if you can separate the two.*

It was not another voice, but her own. Obviously.

Still, she was scared that there would be some kind of payment to the ferryman, to get her to the other side with seeds in hand and a ticket home.

Or perhaps this was a test, dealt out by her own unconscious, of how much she wanted to stay.

Most of all, she could not shake the nagging worry that Oni had said *no*.

It felt good to get out of the city. Once they were through the worst of the traffic, the fumes, and the terrifying buses that had right of way in their dedicated lane, but cared little for cars or taxis – even less for two people on a motorbike – whatever lane they happened to be in.



Zé was a good driver. Sure, confident and careful. She soon relaxed into the feel of his back, the wind in her face, and the landscape opening up around them. Rolling hills, old plantation fields, modern *fazendas*, crumbling monasteries.

She felt guilty that she had not called her father to tell him she would be out of town for two days. She was not ready, she told herself. Still assimilating. And anyway, if he called, Sebastian would update him. The porter didn't know where she was going, but he knew when she was due back.

They left the highway and took the secondary roads, through entire hillsides infested with imported bamboo, through small, scrappy industrial towns. They stopped and bought Antartica *guarana* and bubbly cheese *pasteis* at a gas-station diner, and ate them sitting on plastic chairs on the forecourt, with the truckers and mechanics.

Zé was not at all surprised that his great grandmother had appeared to Maddy in her dreams. He seemed almost to expect it.

'She seemed kind of fierce,' Maddy said. 'Angry, even.'

He nodded.

'She was like that. Everyone says so.' She wants to ask him if he ever met her, and realises how ridiculous that sounds. So instead she asks, 'So she left Salvador and went to live in Cachoeira – after her husband died?'

He took a bit of his *pastel*, and a long string of hot cheese hung suspended until he had caught it all up with his mouth. If they hadn't been in public she would have licked the greasy slick it left behind on his lips. 'If Mateo hadn't died in the uprising,' he said, chewing spongily, 'Oni would have killed him herself.'

He told her the rest of the story that evening, over cold beers in a bar on the banks of the Paraguaçu river, which ran between Cachoeira and São Felix. Cars and donkeys both used the steel bridge that linked the two villages, the lights of the former reflecting in the water as the evening darkened.

*Mateo* was the love of Oni's life, and he betrayed her.

They met on a slave boat, Oni and the great grandfather of Zé Carlos' great grandmother.

He had been working with the slavers for some time, working to secure his freedom, while transporting his fellow Africans into bondage.

‘That must have been a conflicted position.’

‘I suppose so. It certainly became so when he fell in love with one of the women he was transporting. Oni was a person of strong morals – she saw things very clearly in black and white. What was right was right, what was wrong was wrong.’

‘And Mateo did her wrong?’

‘But not at first.’

He told how they set up a life, Mateo and Oni, whose prowess with herbs soon earned her her own freedom. He did one last trip, to see out his contract, and to set them up with the goods they needed to start their business, selling healing *folios* and other comfort items from the homeland. ‘Their store was where the market is now,’ he said, ‘at Sete Portas.’ She had probably walked right past it, that Saturday.

He stopped travelling when their daughter was born – Abeo, the grandmother of Zé’s great grandmother.

Oni’s repute as a healer continued to spread. Their business was successful, they were active in the civic affairs of Pelhourinho slaves. Oni was a member of Salvador’s first *terreiro*, the Casa Branca at Engenho Velho, set up by three freed African women. She was there when the split happened, which set up the second *terreiro*, and soon after that a third. These three still existed among the hundreds of *terreiros* in Salvador today.

The night was warm and there was no breeze, but a coolness rose up from the mud of the river as the tide ran out. Zé ordered more drinks.

Mateo, too, was politically active, well connected with both his former employers and the men on the street. He could move between both worlds, upstairs and down, between the parlours of the main houses and the slave quarters in the basement.

He was hiding out in one of those basements when the trouble began. ‘You know of the uprising of 1835?’

Maddy had heard about it. Led by freed Africans dressed in white – a mode of dress influenced by the proud and well-organised Muslim slaves or *Malês*, a mode outlawed at the time in Salvador. The men in white rose up in the early hours one January morning to overthrow their colonial masters and set up their own self-ruled community.

‘It was all over in a matter of hours.’ Zé stared out over the water, back in time. ‘The cavalry scattered the insurgents. They rounded up as many rebels as they could. Some were publicly executed. Some were sent back to Africa. Some sentenced to a life of hard labour.’

‘And Mateo?’

‘Mateo was asleep in the arms of his lover, a beautiful young slave named Jumoke, when the uprising began. And Oni was at home mixing a poison to kill him for it.’

Mateo had no intention of taking part in the uprising. But fate had other plans for him. When authorities got wind of the upcoming revolt, the insurgents had to kick start the action earlier than they’d intended. They ran around in the pre-dawn hours knocking on doors to rouse their compatriots; Mateo was pulled out of Jumoke’s bed and into the fray.

‘Jumoke ran straight to Oni’s house, distraught. She swore that they had both thought Mateo would be safer hiding out with her than at home with Oni, where he would be looked for.’

Mateo was arrested along with all the others. Perhaps because of his relative standing with the commercial class, the overlords decided to make a particular example of him. ‘Or perhaps it was because Jumoke was the slave and concubine of a prominent government official who didn’t appreciate his fruit being sampled by another. In any case, Mateo was sentenced to 2000 lashes at the *pelhourinho*.’

Two thousand. The brutality was only beginning to sink in for Maddy, sitting on this quaint cobbled riverside square in a city even more picturesque than where she had just come from. ‘How is it possible to bear that many lashes?’

Zé took a while to answer. When he did his mouth swelled with an anger she had not yet seen in him. ‘They were very cruel, those governors. But clever, in their twisted way. They spread the beating out over many days, so the victim had time to recover his strength in between. So that he would feel the full force of the next beatings. And survive that.’

But they pushed Mateo too hard. He didn’t make it past 1200 lashes.

The sepsis set in on day five. He was let down, then strung up the next day, each day until the gashes stippled his back like bark, new wounds opening the old ones.

In the intervals between beatings Oni and Jumoke tended to him, together. Instead of poison, Oni prepared salves for his wounds, while Jumoke bathed him and fed him cool water. Together, as they watched him suffer, compassion dissolved their enmity and turned it to solidarity.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> day, he died.

When he died, a part of Oni died too. As she had known it would.

But Jumoke was carrying new life.

Who knows whether it came from the seed of her lover, of which she seemed convinced? The child could as easily have been her master's. Ultimately, the source didn't matter to either woman. They were bound inextricably together now, the powerful herbalist and the beautiful young slave.

## Cachoeira, Bahia

xx

A few kilometres outside of the town, without road sign or warning, other than a wire trash bin with a swarm of bees buzzing around the open mouths of tin cans, Zé turned off onto a small dirt road. They followed the two-track road until it narrowed into one, and almost diminished. Then Zé pulled over to the side, parked the bike deep inside a clump of bushes and held apart two stand of wire fence for her to climb though. On the other side the slope dropped down into mangoes and *jaca* with their enormous oblong fruits, myrtles and jacarandas and stately *pau brasil*. She felt something shift and settle inside of her. Was there any desire greater than the one she felt to be in there?

Zé had promised to take her on a river hike. She had her field notebook and a bathing suit in her backpack and she wanted to get into the green. Finally, some real wild Bahian forest.

The sun was already high and hot, the cicadas were in full voice. Zé led the way with a sureness that said he had been here many, many times before. She felt her body loosen and relax as they got into their stride.

There were a number of diverging paths, but he kept to the main one until she heard the whisper of water ahead.

He paused next to a huge buttressed myrtle, checked to see that she was still behind him, and veered off into the forest.

This path really was invisible, unless you knew it was there. He began to climb steeply up, away from the water sound, and she followed him, enjoying the way the muscles on the back of his calves pulled and clenched, enjoying the feeling of working her own buttocks and thighs.

They walked long enough that she got lost in a reverie of green. She could feel the sweat under her breasts and at the back of her neck, but she was so energised she felt she could go on forever. She had found her rhythm in the steady climb, the occasional diversion around roots or over fallen branches. They passed thickets of bamboo, *samambaias* spiralling up in the undergrowth – Elizabeth Bishop and Lota Suares named their Petropolis house after the fern – and high epiphytes dangling safely out of reach.

Cherry-fruited pitanga grew alongside several species of palm, and in the undergrowth *acerola*, *cidreira*, *alfazema*, *erva doce*, and *viuzinha* with its purple underside. The mix of indigenous and useful cultivated plants told her that this forest had once been much less wild.

The path began to drop down, and the water sounded louder as the forest thinned and then opened up onto the river.

Water rushed rapid over stones, then pooled in a deep, wide basin behind it. The far end was curtained by a waterfall, next to it a series of flat, sun-baked rocks.

Maddy kicked off her sandals and stepped into the cool dark water. *Zé* did one better, taking off each item of clothing with exaggerated care, folding and laying his shirt, then his shorts on the flat rock. He stood naked before her, unselfconsciously magnificent, and began to undo the grass band at his waist.

‘What do you call that?’ She can’t believe she has never asked.

‘*Umbigeiro*,’ he replied, releasing it and coiling it with reverent care, placing it in a fold in his shirt. ‘It is protection, as your beads are for you.’

‘And you don’t wear it in the water?’ she was looking him in the eye, but taking in every other inch of him with every other sense she had.

‘I don’t wear it when I am fucking,’ he said, and with a grin he plunged into the water.

She wasn’t far behind.

They were not entirely alone that day. Although there were no other people there, she felt the presence of *Oxum* as they found each other under water, felt *Oxossi*’s approval as *Zé* pinned her to the rock face. *Iansã*’s caress was in the breeze that dried them off on the flat rock. It was *Ossain*’s laughter that caused the leaves to bend and sway and quiver. He was delighted when she told him they had company. Anybody else would think she was crazy. Fuck drunk. But was it any different than naming *Gaia* the overarching deity for the planet, putting *Aphrodite* in charge of love, or giving the *Avalokiteśvara* *Bodhisattva* command over compassion?

He took them a different route back, following the river downstream, rock hopping in places, veering into the greenery and out again. She began to see evidence of

prior cultivation in patches, a clearing with a strip of bottle gourd grown over, a stand of papaya, mango and avocado trees gone wild. She stopped trying to keep a mental map of their progress. Just enjoyed following him. Enjoyed where he had been, in her. They had mapped each other's bodies that day, the hills and valleys of bone and flesh, outcrops and forests and lakes. She had studied his contours like one who might need to remember them again, if she ever needed to think her way home.

Some way in from the river, on a small rise, was a broken down old hut. It could have been a hideout in the days of the *quilombos*, when escaped slaves started small settlements hidden in the protective forests.

Zé stopped and sat down on a low, crumbling stone wall. He began to scratch absently at the heel of one foot. In his pocket she could hear the crinkle of condom wrappers. Somewhere on his person he also had a stash of used rubbers, knotted at the neck. She wondered if he would deposit them at the dustbin they'd passed at the main road turnoff. He had already rinsed them, releasing his spent tadpoles into the water, before they left the river. She was touched by the reverence of this offering.

He watched her now, expecting something.

She was too sated to feel much curiosity. She stretched her arms up and arched back to look up into the trees. And there it was. *Newbouldia mundii*.

She squealed. 'You knew it was here all along!'

He was smiling now, stood to meet her as she rushed to embrace him, then pushed off again to throw her arms around the trunk of the tree. It was one of a stand of eight, forming a half circle around the house.

She realised she was hugging a tree.

She felt like doing a victory dance. Heard him laugh behind her as she began to comb the ground, looking for fallen seeds. There's one! She picked it up, held it in the flat of her hand.

'Do you know how rare this is?'

It sat there, the little planet. She imagined the little Prince, microscopic snakes and spiked volcanoes. She had gathered a handful before she looked up to the tree itself. There were a few bracts within reach that were just past flower stage, their seeds

collectable. She reached up to break them off, already opening the mouth of her string bag, ready to slip them inside.

She felt his hand on her arm.

‘Wait.’

University of Cape Town



## Cachoeira, Bahia

### xxi

It was sunset by the time they got back to Cachoeira. They were staying in an old converted convent, its rooms dormitory-stark but its spaces high and reverent. The stairs, steep and slim-strutted, as if no extravagance had been permitted when constructing them, were bevelled in the middle from centuries of footsteps.

They decided to stop for a drink by the river before heading back. They had just sat down when a huge hand came over and laid itself on Zé's shoulder. 'Oi rapaiz', the voice was deep and bold, and accompanied by a ringing back slap. Zé stood up and embraced the man before introducing him.

Fernando was large. Muscles bulging out of his vest, he bristled with strength and strutting machismo. He put Maddy's teeth on edge.

There was a rapid exchange between the two; she didn't catch all of it. She saw Zé looking at her once or twice, he seemed uneasy. But Fernando was insistent.

'You will come tonight,' he said to her, repelling her with his certainty, his booming manliness.

He was from a local *terreiro*; there was a ceremony that night and Zé was invited – more like instructed – to come along. And to bring her. Why not?

'It will be a little different than you are used to,' Zé said on the way back to the convent. 'This is candomblé de Jeje, a different nation ... It will be okay though.' He didn't look totally convinced.

They only just had time to slip back to their room and change out of their river washed clothes. It had already become second nature for Maddy to have a white blouse and skirt handy. Just in case.

When they were ready to leave he pulled her close and stood holding her for a long while. Then he pulled a strand of red and white beads from his pocket. The colours of Xangô. 'I want you to wear these tonight. From Ilê Axé de Bencois.' She wondered whether it was a sign of respect, to wear the beads from one's home *terreiro*, or whether she was in some special need of protection. She felt an uneasy fluttering in her gut.

The *terreiro* was just outside the town, in the same direction as the river. It was smaller and more casual than she was used to, and it was headed by a *pai-de-santo*, rather than a woman. That explained the energy; there was an edge to it. Or perhaps it was the warrior goddess making herself felt. Tonight's ceremony was in honour of Iansã, and red was the colour of the mood.

They could hear the drums as soon as Zé cut the bike engine, even though they were parked some way down the road. Big and deep and compelling.

By the time they stepped past the sacrifice at the threshold the beat had them in its grip.

Maddy found a space on the women's side between a skinny woman with very red toenails, and an immense one whose thighs pressed hotly against her. Zé, she noticed, had been pulled right in to the drummer's circle with more swaggering, backslapping bonhomie. He wasn't playing yet, but it looked like he soon would be. She looked forward to that. She loved the way he would be there and elsewhere, completely absorbed in what he was doing, but also totally tuned into the effect it was having on the gathering.

The small hall was packed, and there was the usual casual coming and going of the early phases of the ceremony. The women were circling in their skirts and their beads, greeting each orixá in turn through dance and gesture. It was strange to see new faces, but at least she could recognise the affiliations.

But still, there was a wild edge here.

Iansã took the *pai-de-santo* first. He left the hall and returned in a white turban with a tray of *acarajé* – fried shrimp dumplings – in a basket balanced on his head. With whoops and howls he/she began flinging them around the room. Maddy wanted to laugh, but the faces around her were very serious.

In the corner, Zé and Fernando were having an intense conversation. She could not get used to the roughness here, so different from the energy at the Ilê Axé de Bencois, with Mae Gabriella at the helm. But perhaps she was just interpreting it wrongly. For a moment it looked as if the two men were actually going to come to blows. Then her view was obscured by circling women, as the *pai-de-santo* made his way to the door – it seemed he was going to take his whooping and howling out into the street. As he left the hall firecrackers went off signalling to the world that an orixá had arrived on the earthly

realm. The drums continued their deep pulsing. Hypnotic. And more and more frenzied. They made her feel sleepy, and at the same time hyperaware.

Zé was not among the drummers. She couldn't see him anywhere – not in the men's section, not in the glimpse of the back rooms she could see through the curtained door. She looked at some of the other incarnated orixás – Ogum in his blue robe and silver crown was someone she didn't recognise. There was only one with a hidden face and that was Omulu, orixá of pox and health. He wore a grass fringe that covered his face entirely – every time she saw him she thought of cousin It from the Adams family – but she could tell by the shape of the feet and the movements that this wasn't Zé.

He must be taking care of business in the back. But not having him in sight made her feel slightly panicked. To calm herself, she closed her eyes and willed herself to think of green. Amazon reflective green. This was the place she always took herself to when she couldn't sleep. It's as good as meditation. She could even sense the drums receding. So very quiet, on the black green river. *As above, so below...*

And then she was back in the swirl of colour as the procession entered again and the drumming became even more frenetic. The *pai* /lansã was circling the room now, hugging everyone in turn, everyone keen to accept a blessing. The hugs were fierce – he seemed to be trying to pull them in to his realm. And a crazy number of them were succumbing. They were falling like flies – there were more people on the floor now than the attendants know what to do with. Men, she thought. So bloody disorganised.

There was a jostling camaraderie as a group of four men decided how best to carry out the prone body of the hefty woman Maddy had been sitting next to earlier. They called in a reinforcement, and between five of them, they just managed to pick her up, by feet, elbows and head, and carry her to each of the four corners of the room in turn, and then out through the curtained doorway into the back quarters.

And still no sign of Zé. People were whirling and dancing around the floor, stepping over and around those who had fallen. Until they could be picked up and carried out, they lay prone, covered corpse-like with white sheets.

The *pai* and his procession were approaching Maddy's side of the hall now. She looked down at the ground, willing him not to embrace her. She stared hard at the slim feet and the crimson toes of the woman on her left, and in her peripheral vision she saw

his approaching feet bare, under a blood red hemline. She did not want to look at him, but she felt the blood thrum rise, beating in her ears, competing with the drums. She sensed, rather than saw, Iansã hold her neighbour tight, then release her. Disappointment mixed with relief as the orixá passed Maddy by. Her neighbour slumped forward, limp as a rag doll, taken.

What happened next chilled Maddy to the bone. The woman raised her head, let out a shriek and fell to the ground. But the way that she fell – she seemed to be horizontal before she reached the ground, hovering ever so slightly above it, and then rolling. Rolling in the air, rolling as she hit the floor, and she kept on rolling, with frightening speed, from one side of the *barraçao* to the other.

There was no way that motion was humanly possible – not without being pushed by human hands. But there was nobody near her. Quite the contrary – people were jumping out of her way as she approached. Stiff, horizontal, eyes rolled back, arms tucked in, legs straight out and together, she was rolling like a log from one end of the room to the other. How did her body know when it had reached the end and it was time to change direction, to turn around? Who was doing the turning?

Some of the men were laughing, scratching their heads about what to do with the woman. Then cowboy Fernando took charge. He timed it perfectly; placing himself directly in the path of her approach, he lifted up one leg as she rolled into the other, then lowered it so that she was caught between his two feet. The rolling stopped. He stood there for a moment, hands on hips, looking for all the world like a gladiator astride his conquest. Then someone brought a white sheet and he stepped off. The woman lay, face down, utterly still. Maddy worried that she might suffocate. What about putting her in the recovery position, at least?

She felt like everything had stopped to witness the event, but nothing had stopped. The drums continued and the dancing continued and there were shouts from outside and more firecrackers, although this time they sounded like gunshots. But nobody took any notice. For the first time, Maddy felt afraid. And with that fear came the knowledge that there is a great silence, beyond the beating of the drums and her own heart, and on the other side of that silence is Eliot's terrifying roar, waiting to engulf her, and they were all in one moment inside of her and the colours swirled together and disappeared.

‘What is she doing here?’ It’s a man’s voice, gruff and unfriendly.

‘She is a sister,’ came the reply. Gentle but defiant. ‘We are taking care of her.’

Maddy opened her eyes and looked into a face that was kind, but completely unfamiliar. No, not completely – she recognised the broad cheeks, the wide eyes. The skirt, patterned with flowers and leaves under a white blouse. So many green strands in her rainbow of beads. She had seen this woman circling in the earlier parts of the ceremony. It came back to Maddy in a rush – the strange *terreiro*. This must be the back room. It was dingy here, and damp. Mosquito damp.

The woman handed her a glass of water. ‘*Sou Imalia,*’ she said ‘What is your name, *querida?*’

Maddy told the woman her name in between long gulps of water. Such a thirst!

‘Don’t worry,’ Imalia reassured her. ‘I have been with you the whole time.’

‘Did I...’

‘You just passed out.’

‘I wasn’t... taken?’

Imalia shakes her head no. ‘I’m sorry.’

Maddy wasn’t sorry. The drums were still insistent. Where was Zé? Why wasn’t he here? She had no idea how much time had passed. She sat up. The mattress she’d been lying on was so thin it bent in the middle. Through the open doorway she could see a woman costumed, yellow satin skirt, the headdress with the curtain of beads hanging down in front of her face. A mirror in her hand. Hello Oxum. There was another woman fussing and settling the costume – another attendant, like the one seeing to her now.

*What just happened?*

She stood up shakily, while Imalia hovered, ready to catch her if needs be. She asked to use the bathroom, and was lead to a cement ablution with a bare toilet. There was a midge-filled bucket next to it and a showerhead hanging over the middle of the room. The water didn’t work. Maddy didn’t really need to go. She just needed to be by herself for a moment. This place was creeping her out.

When she came out again the corridor was even more crowded with people in trance and their attendant minders. Maddy felt the rising panic of claustrophobia. She needed to get out of here.

There was a back door to a garden. She slipped out into the fresh air and took some deep breaths. She saw Imalia peering at her through the door and signalled to her – *I'm okay.*

The garden was more of a scrap yard, and there was a path around the side of the building to the road in front. She could see Zé's bike parked down the street. He was still here, at least.

A procession came down the road, lead by the *pai-de-santo*/Iansã who was still whooping and flinging *acarajé* dumplings. *Oh the wayward wind, is a restless wind, a restless wind, that yearns to wander...* Patsy Cline? Here? She felt dizzy again and sat down on the kerb. She could see inside the *terreiro* through the windows that opened up onto the front terrace. She had no desire to go inside there again.

And suddenly, he was there beside her.

'Let's get out of here.'

Zé. She was so relieved to see him, to press against the back of him on the bike and hear the noise of the drums recede beneath the roar of their engine, that she almost forgot to be angry with him for deserting her. Almost.

## Cachoeira, Bahia

### xxii

*When I say the words over your grave I will tell that you saved me, even while you sold yourself.*

*When they talk about you in the town they will say that I saved you, even as I tied you to my bed.*

*Only we can know the covenant we had, how we needed each other. What we overcame to be here.*

*Oni: my name means 'born in a holy place'. But I was taken from there in a way most unholy and cast into the bowels of hell – not a hell of fire, but of water.*

*Some of us survived the endless, icy passage, the foul stench, the shivering disease. You were there. You saw to it.*

*I will tell how we found each other on a voyage not of our choosing. Stolen, we did what we must do to survive.*

*We made a new life in a new world.*

*I will tell that you had been braver than you know, even while you wavered.*

*I will tell that you tried to do right, even while working on the ships. Even when you gave up your many gods, and took on their one.*

*Allowed yourself to be shackled, to avoid chains.*

*You did what you had to, to survive.*

*Even so, you questioned your new god, endlessly.*

*I will tell how you saw us suffering in that floating coffin - although it was I who touched you most.*

*I will tell how you could stand no more of witnessing it. How you brought out the plants you had stowed away to sell on the other side.*

*You cured me simply by having the right herbs. You did not know how to use them. I did.*

*I cured you of a loveless heart, and released you from the bondage of having to wander that punishing sea, exposing yourself to the anguish of each trip. Doing penance to a god that was not your original god, for a sin that was not your original sin.*

*It was I who freed you from the guilt of plying your own people.*

*It was I who led you back to the land and to the light.*

*It was I who took you to an earthly paradise, night after night after night.*

*I showed you a way to redeem yourself. Because I saw that you never meant to cause pain.*

*Until now.*

*This time, there will be no redemption. It is too late for you. Although you are not yet dead.*

*I showed you a way to trade for benefit as well as profit. I had the knowledge, you had free movement.*

*We built a life together.*

*I was the curandeira. You the curator. You procured the herbs, I put them to good use. Mostly to good use. When the situation demands, the herbs can be turned to darker magic.*

*You brought me the seeds, the roots, the stems the, leaves. I knew how to grind them, and when, with what, and just how much.*

*I know the secret purpose of the vine whose flowers funnel into a deep black heart.*

*I have many uses for the purple berries that come from the buttressed tree.*

*I feel the seeping sorrow of the milky shrub with the silent, tongue-shaped leaves.*

*Still, it is true, you are not yet dead.*

*I will tell how we made new life, in this new place. How we grew the bush and the vine from the old lands. How we found new ones here, and planted them in fields.*

*You planted a seed in me and when she was born we called her Abeo, because she brought us so much joy.*

*I have taught her what I know. But I have not taught her this.*

*I have not taught her how to mix a powder so potent that a smudge from under a fingernail can extinguish a fire forever.*



*This will be your last lesson.*

*We were strong, you and I. Our people looked to us for comfort and for cures. We helped them. We helped each other. Together, we became powerful.*

*That power has gone to your head. And you allowed your head to be turned.*

*I have seen the way you look at her. You will look no more.*

*I have borne many things. I will not bear this.*

*Your position, your status, the respect you command, is because of what I know how to do.*

*How could you forget what I know how to do?*

*Tonight you will drink this draught. And then I will incant other words over a stone to mark your decomposing body.*

*I will celebrate your strength.*

*I will mourn your weakness.*

*I will tell of many things. But I will keep this secret.*

*We do what we must do to survive.*

Maddy sat up with a start. The small, dark room, the woman pounding herbs with a stone mortar and pestle, speaking her betrayal to her absent husband, were gone.

She was in the convent bedroom, with its high ceilings, white sheets crumpled at the bottom of the enormous too-hard bed. Zé was not in it with her. He was sitting on the wide windowsill across the room. The shutters were open and he was silhouetted in the light from the yellow streetlight. The fireworks were still crackling in the hills around Cachoeria. As the saints came marching in.

‘Who is SeedCorp?’ His voice is rough.

‘I don’t know, I...’

‘Fernando introduced me to a man from SeedCorp tonight. He said you would know why he was here.’

‘I’ve never had any dealings with any “SeedCorp”.’

‘He offered Fernando a lot of money.’

*Newbouldia.*

‘Look, I know who these people are. But I told you, I never had anything to do with them.’

‘I defended you.’

They decided to leave as soon as it was light. As dawn broke she saw that he had circles under his eyes like bruises.

In the pale light she could see that her white shirt was stained yellow with the dendê oil from *acarajé*. She didn’t think she would ever be able to get it out.

University of Cape Town

## Salvador, Bahia

### xxiii

The conversation she had with Kirk did nothing to make her want to return to Cape Town.

‘You told me this was an institute initiative!’ But even as she said it, she knew she hadn’t asked the right questions. Had let too many things slide, in her eagerness to get away. Had let Kirk take care of all the details, knowing the kind of pressure he had been under.

‘They insisted on secrecy. And they’ll still pull the funding if I don’t deliver.’

‘You really are not in your right mind Kirk. You know what this will do to your reputation? You’re gambling with your entire career here.’

‘No one needs to know.’

‘Oh, and how do we manage that? I get back from Brazil and before too long SeedCorp releases new findings on the efficacy of *Newbouldia*’s miracle peptide...’ The truth dawned quickly. ‘It’s me. I would take the rap for this!’

‘I could plead total ignorance, it’s true,’ he said it as if he were thinking it for the first time. ‘Tell them you put in for leave and went off on your own. Or...’

‘Or?’

‘None of this has gone through official channels.’

‘The papers...’

‘Were never going to come.’

She felt more hurt than angry.

‘I’m sorry Maddy, to have put you in this position. But I had no other choice.’

‘Oh really.’

‘Don’t be a child about it.’

How dare he? ‘*I’m* being a child? You’re throwing everything away on a fantasy cure? A long shot that will probably come too late to help Gwen anyway?’

‘It’s not about Gwen. It’s about our kids. The medical bills are crippling us, and they are both planning to go to university.’ So it all came down to money.

‘And I’m the price you’re prepared to pay. Nice.’

‘Well of course I’m hoping it isn’t going to come to that. You will be richly rewarded for your part, and no-one need be any the wiser.’

‘I’ll know.’

‘Get off your high horse Maddy. We all know how corrupt this game is. The rules are bent all the time. It’s not as if we’re wiping out a species here – once the benefits of the *Newbouldia* compound are proven, the tree will become famous. It will be reintroduced to Africa. Grown all over the place.’

She thinks of a small stand of trees near a riverbank, near a small, broken down hut. Of a flat river stone, sun baked, warm as skin.

‘And even if I had the seeds – which I don’t – just how did you propose I get these back without papers?’

‘In your suitcase, I thought. Even better if you carry them on your person.’

‘Like a drug mule?’

‘Don’t be overdramatic. Wrap them up with some bags of coffee and other duty free. Say they’re peppercorns, whatever. You’ll think of something.’

‘Kirk it’s the principle. You can’t have one set of rules for yourself and another for everyone else. This is thin edge of the wedge stuff, you know that.’

‘Nobody loses anything, Maddy. But if you leave the seeds there things just stay the same. Nobody gets a cancer cure. Nothing happens.’ She hadn’t told him about the SeedCorp guy in Cachoeira. That the company was hedging their bets. If they were this close, others could be too.

‘Until somebody else comes along to exploit them.’

‘So why not be the one to get there first? Get your hands on a decent amount of seed. And once you’ve tested viability, you can start the proper process to protect them. Best of all possible worlds Maddy.’

What did he know of possible worlds?

## Salvador, Bahia

### xxiv

‘I feel sorry for your seeds, in that cold, cold place.’ Zé was sweating. He’d been swinging his machete, clearing a space for a new herb garden. ‘They belong out here in the sunshine.’

She wondered if he was talking about her seeds, the ones already in storage in Cape Town, or the *Newbouldia* seeds. The seeds he didn’t let her collect. Because of taboos, and Iroko, and proper procedure. Because of reasons he did not have to explain to her.

He wasn’t wrong. In theory you could keep seeds for 500 years in the big vaults. But you also needed to keep growing samples out in real time so they could adapt to changing conditions. Imagine the climate shock of a poor seed that went into a vault 50 years ago – would it be able to withstand the higher temperatures, the severe floods and droughts the world was experiencing now? Plus, seeds are social entities; they need conversations with like ‘sensibilities’ to survive. They need time to adapt.

Take the conversations between corn and the *teosinte* Vavilov found in the Sierra Madre, the mother lode of South American crop diversity. Their conversation had been going on for millennia, like neighbours who didn’t feud, but rather shared what they had in times of need, helping each other out so that they both became stronger. This was especially true of the corn, which grew better and stronger in fields when *teosinte*, its wild, ancient ancestor, grew on the verges.

This was back when the fields had verges, before the loggers started building airstrips on ‘empty’ wild spaces. Before monoculture interrupted the conversation, and before corn production was taken over by taco producers who mixed up genetically modified transgenic seeds and introduced them to the old fields. Seeds with ‘terminator’ genes embedded in them to make them sterile, to make the farmers dependent on the suppliers.

It was not so much that these seeds were mutant, but that they were made mute, rudely silencing their conversation. A conversation that included blue corns and red ones, purple and bright yellow varieties more suited to the highland cold than the large, bland, white kernels favoured by industry. Like a gate-crasher to the last supper, they interrupted the flow of sacred secrets that kept plants and people strong in ways scientists are only beginning to understand. The kind of neighbourliness that kept the corn family from becoming inbred and stunted, and allowed it to develop strong genetic variations, the better to withstand droughts, or wetter winters, or changes in the strength and potency of the sun.

‘The plants that grow here,’ Zé was saying, ‘will not be the same as the ones in Africa – not the same as their parents or grandparents. I don’t just mean because they have mixed with local plants to make hybrids.’ He called it *o syncretismo dos arvores*. The syncretism of trees. He’d been riffing on it all morning, and she had the feeling that he was building up to something.

The angle of the sun, the quality of the soil. Wind direction, humidity. The trauma of the sea voyage. All of these things would change the plants fundamentally, between Africa and here.

He finally decided to take a break from his chopping. He sat down next to her on the fallen log and pushed his machete tip into the ground.

There was a new space between them, since Cachoeira. At first she was angry that he had abandoned her there, in the middle of the ceremony, left her to be pulled into trance without him guiding the drums that got her there. But he soon soothed her down. Each had their own journey into and through candomblé, he told her. He knew that she was being safely taken care of.

*She’s a sister.*

‘Imalia?’

He nods. ‘She is of the *Irmanidade*, yes.’ Worlds within worlds.

There was a web, still dewy, at the underside of the log she sat on now, holding Zé’s hand. No sign of the spider. And no fire ants, today. ‘There are certain places – sacred places – where plants grow special qualities,’ he continued. ‘Your *estrelinhas*,’ he said, ‘they could be very different here, than they are back in Africa?’

‘There aren’t any left, back in Africa,’ she reminded him.

‘Theoretically speaking,’ he insisted.

She shrugged. The god she believed in, the one found in the inexplicable miracles of nature, was not so very different from the animist’s nature gods. It just didn’t need a human face, or strange fallibilities, or personality quirks. And she didn’t need a pantheon of wilful deities to tell her what was right in the world and what wasn’t. There is a beautiful symmetry, an intelligence, to the way plants adapt and survive and mutate to their own benefit. It is only when we start playing god, believing we can use science to isolate a gene, put it in a pill, patent it and sell it and expect the same happy result, that we go wrong. On this score she and Zé were in complete agreement.

‘There is not one illness that doesn’t have a plant cure,’ Tia Betinha told her during one of their lunches. ‘It’s just that we don’t have the knowledge of it yet. Or we don’t have it anymore.’

What is it that gives a plant its healing power? Is it to do with the soil’s particular condition – a vein of iron running through, say? Is it to do with the other plants that grow in the area, and their incessant wordless conversations? Is it just that we don’t know enough yet, don’t understand the miraculous mysteries enough to distil all of the essences of a plant into another form? We are not yet, perhaps never will be, the alchemists we long to be. Not with the Petri dish and lab coat. Not with pure science alone. Only with some kind of magic. A magic steeped in respect. In Einstein’s ‘beautiful mysterious’.

‘They could be different,’ Zé repeated.

‘What?’

He began to beat the machete blade on the ground, softly, like a drum stick. As if the rhythm would call forth clarity.

‘What if I don’t want you to take those *estrelinhas*,’ he said eventually. ‘What if I were to ask you to stay here, and work with the plants we have here. Could you do that?’

She looked at the face that had become so dear to her. Breathed in the smell of him, which she wanted to inhabit. Their conversation felt like it had been going on forever. The intimate places on his body that she knew now, the ones that fit hers, the ones she felt safe in. That felt like home.

‘I don’t know,’ she says.

Do seeds change? Do people? Evolution happens over generations, through trial and error and luck and circumstance. And many, many misses and near misses.

She had missed her father. When she got back from Cachoeira there was a message to say that he had gone. *You know where to find me*, he had written on the pousada notepad stationery. *When you are ready*.

‘I’m always amazed that the caterpillar has exactly the same DNA as the butterfly it turns into,’ she said eventually. ‘It always gives me hope, when I think about that. That we really could become anything we want to be.’

‘What do you want to be?’ he asked her.

‘Different,’ she said.

University of Cape Town



## Salvador, Bahia

### xxv

Mãe Gabriella looked at the spiny spheres Maddy held out in her hand. The few *Newboulida subspecies* seeds Zé had allowed her to take from the ground – after offering blessings to Iroko, Xangô and Ossain – so that she could show them to the *mãe-de-santo* and ask her permission to collect a proper sample for the seed bank.

Later – much later – she would realise that, once again, he forgot to ask permission of *Exu*. He was always forgetting *Exu*. And, as he was always quick to point out, it's not a good idea to slight that mischievous orixá.

All Maddy could do was hope against hope that she would be able to convince Mãe Gabriella of the noble nature of her mission. Because her mission *was* noble. Kirk was not going to get his hands on these seeds. And if SeedCorp found another way to get them, she would do her best to make sure that Kew had a sample first. And that the *terreiro*'s right to use and grow them was protected by law.

The old woman held the seeds in the palm of a hand that looked wrinkled and ancient. 'These are completely gone, now, in Africa?'

Maddy nodded. The old woman said nothing for a very long while, just rolled the seeds around the ends of her fingers with the thumb of that same hand, as if testing for an essence, or an answer. It was the same motion that people make when they are trying to signal money. As if you can only touch true value with the very tips of your fingers.

'From Cachoeira.'

Maddy nodded again. She tried not to let her mind return to the river. 'And you went to a *terreiro* of candomblé de jeje?'

Maddy nodded.

'How was it?'

'A little wild.'

The old woman smiled, motioned for her to shift closer.

There were a few things laid out on a small table between them. At centre was a bowl of herbs, floating in water. Maddy held her breath as the mãe-de-santo's hand went out – surely she was not going to drop her precious seed into the brew? She dropped them instead into the bowl of the wooden mortar, scored with countless years of grinding. The pestle was lying next to it, and again Maddy prayed that the mãe-de-santo would not take it up to crush the seeds –

But Mãe Gabriella reached out now to indicate the beads Maddy was wearing around her neck – the ones Zé gave her in Cachoeira. Maddy took them off and handed them over. Mãe Gabriella placed them in the herb water and began to swish them around. 'This is your *terreiro* now,' she said. 'You should wear these along with the *contas* of Yemanjá.' Then she was incanting, calling on the orixás to bless and protect Maddy in all her endeavours. Asking them to keep her safe, and to keep her close.

'Luisa will give you some *folios* when you leave, to cleanse with,' she said.

The audience, it seemed, was over. The seeds were still sitting, five huddled together, in the bottom of the mortar bowl.

'What about the seeds....'

'One thing at a time, child. One thing at a time.'

When Maddy left, she felt like she was abandoning five small children.

Luisa has the herbs waiting for her as she exited. The woman always seems to be one step ahead of her.

She wanted to see Zé one more time, before she left the garden for the day. There was something else she needed to ask him.

The sun was hot but the welcome cool hit her as she descended into the garden forest. Zé was still sitting on the log where she left him half an hour ago. As if he had been waiting.

'Mae blessed the beads,' she told him, and he smiled.

'And the *estrelinhas*?'

'She kept them,' Maddy shrugged. 'She says to wait.'

He nodded.

'Oni planted those trees, the eight, didn't she?'

‘Yes.’

‘I dreamed her, in Cachoeira.’ She told him about Oni’s incantation, over what must have been poison intended for Mateu. Before she ended up trying to save him. Oni, together with his mistress.

‘You never told me what happened to Jumoke’s child?’

‘Jumoke had a daughter,’ he said. ‘Who was Oni’s godchild. They stayed here, in Salvador, at this *terreiro*, when Oni and Abeo left for Cachoeira. The families were always connected. We stayed close.’

The garden itself seemed to be listening, hushed and reverent. Until one small voice piped up, ‘That was my *avó*, *ne papa*?’

‘*Sim, minha filha*,’ Zé replied.

They hadn’t heard the school bell ring. She usually left before the school bell. And here was Liliana, out of school. In her uniform and her scuffed knees and the Band-Aid that matched the one that had long ago fallen off of Zé’s toe. It was not unusual for men to use the terms ‘my child’ for any young boy or girl. But Liliana had said ‘My grandmother’. Did she mean Jumoke’s child? Was she, was Luisa, a daughter of a daughter of Jumoke’s daughter? The generations reflected back, multiple mirrors in Maddy’s mind.

And the little girl had called him Papa.

Maddy looked from the man to the child. Lili had her mother’s unruly hair, but she had Zé’s green eyes. And that crinkle on the lip when she smiled.

So many things fell into place.

Luisa’s hatred of her.

Why hadn’t he just told her?

She excused herself, too quickly, and left the garden.

If she had known she was never coming back, would she have paused a moment longer to say goodbye?

## Salvador

xxvi

‘You have a visitor, Senhorita Magdalena.’

It was the first time Sebastian had ever called up to her room. His voice had none of the suggestiveness he’d never quite lost, when it came to Zé. So she knew before she reached the top of the stairs and looked down at reception that it was not going to be him.

But she really didn’t expect to see Luisa standing there.

It was hard to tell which one was more uneasy. ‘May I?’ Luisa indicated upstairs. She obviously wanted some privacy, but Maddy didn’t want to bring her up to her room, to the place she and Zé had carved out for themselves. Where her sheets still smelled of pepper and musk. Where she had been waiting for her lover to come and explain.

‘We can talk here.’ There was an alcove off the reception area, with uncomfortable square sofa benches built into the walls, and a low wooden table. Luisa perched on the edge of the bench like a bird who couldn’t wait to fly away, and put a plastic bag on the table.

‘So you know.’ Luisa was looking at her with a new kind of frankness. And without evidence of malice.

‘Yes. I think I understand.’ She did not want to be talking to this woman. Everything had changed. ‘I saw Zé with Lili in the garden.’

‘Ours is an old story,’ Luisa said. ‘It is not perfect, but it is what I have and I will do anything to protect it. Even this.’

She pushed the packet towards Maddy. Even before she picked it up, before she felt the heft and shift of a small galaxy, she knew what it was.

‘I saw you coming,’ Luisa said. ‘Now I want to see you go.’

‘But this?’ Maddy still hadn’t looked inside the packet.

‘Whatever it takes to make this problem go away.’

‘Mãe Gabriella?’

‘I will face those consequences.’

The irony was not lost on Maddy, even in the midst of her shock. Luisa was giving her what she came for – effecting her own betrayal of the *terreiro*, to protect her

relationship with Zé. A man who does not love her, although he will do right by his child. Maddy knew that much without having to ask.

By accepting the seeds, Maddy would be making a choice. Zé made it clear in the garden that morning that he didn't want her to have them – certainly not like this. If she accepted them, she would be betraying him even more than the mãe-de-santo, the *terreiro*, and everyone in it.

Maddy picked up the bag and looked inside. There they were. Hundreds of little stars, unmistakably *Newbouldia mundii*. Two healthy sample sizes worth. She muttered a quick thank you to Exu. Zé would approve of that, at least. Then she pushed the bag back towards Luisa. Surprise was an expression she hadn't yet seen on Luisa's freckled face.

'Don't you care about him at all?'

It was Maddy's turn to be surprised. 'I care about him very much. This isn't just about the seeds. Not anymore.'

For a moment they shared something like real solidarity.

'Then you will leave, to protect him. From what happened in Cachoeira.'

'What happened in Cachoeira?'

Luisa's look is pitying. 'There is blood on those seeds. Blood shed to protect you. And if you stay, Zé will pay the price. Again.'

Maddy couldn't help looking down at the packet. Blood? It was just an innocent looking white bag, with the name of a *supermercado* printed on it in red and blue. There was no sign of blood on it that she could see. But surely Luisa didn't mean it literally? It was just an expression. But Maddy *had* thought she heard shots during the ceremony, behind the firecrackers. And there were gaps, even now, in what she could remember about that night.

When she looked up again, Luisa had gone.

## Salvador

xxvii

She watched the cats from their table in the *Beja Flor*. Through the bars of the wrought iron gate, they gathered around the separate bowls of kitty cubes and leftovers and milk. She wondered who it was that put out fresh food every day. She imagined an old nun. But she had never seen any human there. Only the cats. Fat and happy. And free.

Their favourite one was there, with the peculiar markings, like a white inkblot on a black page. When she sat up straight with her front legs together, one half of the white circle was on one side, the other perfectly inverse on the other. It wasn't that noticeable when she moved around. But she spent a lot of time sitting upright, watching the other cats. Queen of the free feast. Zé named her 'Manchinha'. Little smudge. But Zé wasn't here now.

After so many nights of passion, so many days of dotted waiting, ellipsis like, in between, she watched the sun suck its honey from the candy-coated buildings and realised that this time, Zé really wasn't coming.

*So many things seem filled with the intent to be lost that their loss is no disaster...*

But it is, Elizabeth. As you well knew. It *is* a disaster. *Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture I love)*. She should have been more careful, singling this one out as her favourite poem. These things have a way of self-fulfilling.

Five hours and as many caipirinhas later she began to make her way back to her pousada, alone. He'd know where to find her, if he wanted to.

The cobbled streets that seemed so quaint when she first came here, the stones so full of life and death and history and stories, snapped at her feet now. They were jagged and treacherous as she stumbled the familiar short roads and alleys towards her bed.

Loneliness is not a factor of being alone, but of being without someone you've allowed yourself to become accustomed to. That is all. It didn't help to tell herself that. Or to remind herself that when she first came here, she was hell-bent on being a contented lone ranger. She'd felt invincible, inviolable. *In transit*. Even the incident on the Passo steps with the capoeira boys hadn't unnerved her. Of course not, she reminded herself. Zé was watching your back.

She knew with a feeling deeper than certainty that he wasn't watching her now.

As if on cue she turned up the *Rua da Igreja*, where the tops of the tall buildings lean together conspiratorially before pulling apart at the cathedral steps. How many nights, now, had she sat on these steps while steely *timbaus* beat the questions that guitars and voices answered, enjoying the heat and camaraderie of the crowds? Tonight there was no party on the steps, no bright celebrants. Their absence was palpable, the very dark itself a different kind of presence.

She had mounted only three steps when she sensed rather than heard them.

*Oi gatina, cadé o seu namorado agora?*

Hey foxy, where's your boyfriend now?

Good question.

His inflection conveyed no obvious malice, but the way he eased himself off the steps with studied sensuality caused the hairs on the back of her neck to rise. What she felt was not *déjà vu*, but a sick sense that to escape once was lucky, to escape twice, unlikely. But she knew better than to show weakness. Two more shapes coalesced out of the gloom. She kept her eyes down, avoiding direct acknowledgment, and at the same time sharpening her night-time peripheral vision. Through the cachaça-induced fog, something told her that this was the way.

She reminded herself to breathe.

A corner of her retinal brain recognised the apple green neon on the puffed up trainers. He was the one with the bravado. The third man was nervous, unpredictable. Their leader was the sensuous, dangerous one. The one with the too-tight black bicycle shorts that made conspicuous his bulge, the one with the shoulder roll, who continuously clenched and flexed arms ringed with red black green yellow Olodum bangles. The one sliding closer while the others fell in behind.

Her focus became adrenalin sharp as she weighed the options. Run? Not a chance. It was half a kilometre at least to the *Lua Azul*. Play coy? That'd play right into their hands. Pretend she was meeting Zé at the top of the stairs? For all she knew they already knew that he hasn't come, and why. After all, what did she really know about Zé?

In that small moment of distance, disappointment congealed into anger, and anger brought clarity. She turned to face the man-boy, reaching without thinking for the beads around her neck, the turquoise and the red-and-white, together.

She said nothing, just stared her defiance at him. He eyeballed her back, began to sway slowly, arcing his body back, then forward, heel to toe, a pendulum swagger with his black lycra'd pride as its fulcrum, a pretend laziness that contained within it the tight sprung energy of attack.

Still, she said nothing. Dug her own toes into a crack between cobbles, drew strength from the stones, with their history and stories and promise and lack and grief and blood and tears and joy and pain and she knew that her moment was a mere speck in the firmament of all that and yet a legitimate part of it too. It was the only part she had. And she shucked her chin at him, a short, sharp defiant challenge that defined the spirit of this place, felt the strength in doing it, felt *herself, here*.

The man-boy returned the gesture, chin up down, let his eyes slide to the bead necklace, then up to her face.

*Garota nao deve andar sozinha a noite. Tem perigo.*

Yes, there is danger for a woman walking alone at night. But there is also a lisping sibilance in the way he says the word - *sozinha* – that makes his warning seem almost petulant.

So childlike, in fact, that she found she suddenly wanted to laugh. Her lungs filled with air again, like a parachute inflated, something tight inside her unfurled. She shrugged one shoulder and looked around her with affected nonchalance. The space seemed lighter. Even the deepest corners of the stairs breathed benevolence.

*Não sou sozinha.*

And she wondered what she meant, as she turned to walk up the stairs again, leaving the men with their deflated bravura. She wondered how she could have said it with such total certainty.

*I am not alone.*



## Salvador

### xxviii

She shouldn't have made the call. It was just that, in the moment, everything seemed so clear. In that moment, it felt like she really didn't have anything else to lose.

She should know better than to act in the midst of hangover mania. But that would defy the definition of the condition.

'Kirk.'

'Maddy?' In his voice relief stirred in with anxiety. No captain gags this time.

'You're leaving tonight, on schedule?'

'I am.'

'And you have our little starships, safe and sound?'

When Maddy lifted a section of the candlewick bedspread, the seeds rolled around in the flat spaces between the bobbles, little organic pinballs, like those tiny steel marbles you'd get inside of Christmas cracker games, encased in plastic on a flat field with miniature maze traps and indentations. You could spend hours trying to get all the balls into their places in the holes, but there was always one that eluded you, and when you pushed the gyroscopic limits to catch it, all the rest would tumble out and you'd have to start all over again.

'I could just send them direct to Kew.'

The pause was so long, and so quiet, so devoid of transatlantic crackle, that she wondered if he was still there. Then she heard his forced exhalation.

'Risk the future of the species on the Brazilian postal system? You wouldn't do it. Not even you.'

That last comment snagged. But the small spiked balls, themselves snagging on the cotton of the bedspread, focused her. She felt a rush of maternal protectiveness for the little plants in potentia. He had no idea what she had risked to get them here.

'Even if I bring them back with me, I'm not handing them over to *SeedCorp* to patent. I'm not handing them over to you. They're going to Kew, via the institute, with proper protection. And the rights of the *candomblé terreiro* to propagate and use them will remain intact. Those are my conditions.'

‘Conditions?’ He snorted. ‘I think you underestimate the gravity of what you are doing, Magdalene.’

When had he last called her that? Had he ever? It jarred – not just because of the unfamiliarity of the gesture, but because he pronounced it with his flat English inflection. Mad. Mad – a – lane. She’d always hated the connotation of craziness, the potential for schoolgirl jibes. If nothing else, the past six weeks had helped her come to terms with her – and everybody else’s – innate potential for madness. Embrace it, even. Maddy-for-short. There was a kind of comfort in that.

She’d almost forgotten Kirk was still on the other end of the line. ‘Let me remind you that there are papers and protocols, protections that you don’t have. Officially.’ She fingered the seeds, relishing the spikiness of their armour, willing physical sensation to chase out an image of the unfortunate scientist accused of bio-piracy, stuck in a Brazilian prison, talking to his yard weed.

‘Look, right now, *SeedCorp* will look out for you if anything should go wrong.’ Kirk’s sudden gentleness disarmed her. ‘They know where you are, and they’ll do anything to protect their interests. So just come on home, we’ll sort it all out when you get here, okay?’

She was so tired. All she wanted to do was lie back on the bedspread, close her eyes and sleep. Get lost in a dream that Zé might come and wake her up. Succumb to something that felt like madness. For once in her life, to just give up, give in. Then what?

She cradled the phone between her shoulder and her ear as she pulled a needle from her travel sewing kit and fed a strand of black thread into it.

‘You’re not going to change my mind on this Kirk.’ One by one she picked up the seeds and slipped them into the small incision she had made in the inner lining of her moon bag. Right at the back of the bag, where they would nestle next to her belly.

‘All I ask is that we talk about it, before you do anything rash.’

She said nothing, pulling the lips of the incision together, folding the edges inward to make a neat seam.

‘So you’ll bring the seeds back yourself? You’ll keep them on your person?’

She began to sew up the incision, close up to the denim edge, with small, neat stitches. Undetectable, she hoped. ‘They’ll be on me.’

*'Bon voyage then.'* Suddenly he was in a rush to go. *'See you on the other side.'*

She was so tired, so lost in her own internal fog, she didn't even pause to wonder,  
*on the other side of what?*

University of Cape Town

## In Transit

### VI

Stuck in the small bathroom cubicle, counting minutes, counting days, I think I finally realise what *not alone* really means.

So I got so caught up in the seductive spell of it all, I forgot to do some simple maths, forgot to divide the 28 days between the two full moons – and realise that somewhere in between my body should have bled.

One line or two? If this isn't a crossroads, I don't know what is. *Exu*, I say (superstition be damned) *come what may, I need your blessing now*.

Two full, blue, moons. And now there are two blue lines.

So now I'm taking back more than stolen seeds. I'm carrying something else that's only partly mine. I guess me and Luisa share something else in common with Oni and Jumoke, after all.

The lights in the CD store are a little dimmer than the glaring concourse, which makes it a good place to cry. Of course, as I come in I hear Gal Costa's voice. *É d'Oxum*. Synchronicity, serendipity. Whatever. I'm not surprised. If the gods want to have some fun at my expense, if a parallel universe wants to dip in and say 'Hello, I've been here all the time', that's fine with me. I surrender.

Goodbye Zé.

*Nessa cidade todo mundo é d'Oxum ... In this city we are all of Oxum, man, boy, woman and girl ...* It occurs to me that there is an actual little boy, or little girl, forming inside me. I stop crying as if someone has turned off the tap.

The woman behind the counter has bleached white hair that contrasts with her caramel skin, horn-rimmed glasses and a spotted scarf around her neck. She definitely wasn't born when Tom Jobim first sang about the *Girl from Ipanema*, but she's mastered an intimidating retro *bossa nova* chic.

'Can I be of assistance?'

*Toda a cidade irradia magia ... The entire city radiates magic ... It's there in the sweet water, it's there in the salty, and the entire city shines.*

I give her what feels like an inane grin and walk out.

The song dogs me through the duty free concourse. Perhaps it is a myth, this idea of harmony. *The orixás make no distinction between sexes, or colours, or race*, Tia Betinha told me. How did I repay her for her kindness, her many lunchtime hospitalities? I didn't even say goodbye.

When would they notice the missing seeds? Is there a seed counter? Or some divination technique for knowing when seeds are on the move?

Maybe I'll never belong anywhere. But then, I thought I'd never belong to anyone, either.

*Hey there, little star seed...*

No more coffee for me. I buy a bottle of water and find a quiet corner looking out on the runway. Which one of those waiting planes will be taking me away from here? And back to what, exactly? I can't seem to conjure up any enthusiasm. It will be springtime. I will have missed most of the daisies, but the watsonias and the geraniums should still be in bloom. And Vayi will be waiting.

So will Kirk. And Nick.

Oh god.

I do my OCD money-ticket-passport check – it seems less full than before, but everything is there. I zip it up and slip my hand underneath, against my belly. I'm sure I can feel a swelling there. *I want to take you home*, I tell this new thing, *I just don't know where that is*.

What would Em say? Is there time to email her? Am I ready to face that?

I check the flightboard. Everything's on time. Two hours until take off.

There's a flight to New York on the board, two flights underneath mine. I imagine how easy it would be to switch flights. Crossroads.

There's that airport official with the sniffer dog, over in the corner. There's Brazilian coffee in my suitcase. Not too much, but enough to declare at customs. Just to put them off the scent. Not that sniffer dogs were trained to pick up star seeds...

The dog's handler is in a huddle of five policemen – well, four plus one woman, policepersons? – their blue-grey fatigues tucked into their boots. Two of them are leaning against the cafezinho stand. Now there's an airport official in a brown suit. Brown. Why does anyone wear a brown suit, ever?

They are all looking over to me now. WTF? *They'll do anything to protect their interests.* I bend over and scrabble inside my backpack for the water bottle. Keep busy, avoid eye contact. *Whatever it takes to make this problem go away.* I'm rearranging my books, my inflatable travel cushion, the fleece I haven't worn once in the last five weeks, but will definitely need at altitude. *And you'll keep them on your person?* And there are the shoes – man's shoes, offices shoes, brown shoes, polished to a high sheen. The shoes of a fastidious person. And they're pointing right at me.

I look up into the face of the airport official who looks too young for his brown suit, even if he's determined to fill it well. There are beads of sweat on his upper lip, which is already slightly stubbled with five o'clock shadow. Well, he works in an airport. It must be five o'clock by somebody's watch. Even as I wonder what he wants I'm amazed at the acuity of my perceptions. Is this a side effect of my new condition? Or just the heightened awareness of a guilty conscience?

The official looks over his shoulder at the police group at the cafezinho stand for reassurance. They were all looking her way now. *What makes you think you can just walk in there and ask them to hand it over?*

'Com licença, Senorita Bellani? Magdalena Bellani?

'Sim?' My mouth is so dry, but when I try to bring the water bottle to my lips it seems to weigh a ton.

'Would you come with me, please?'

## Epilogue

*Surrounded on all four sides by glass.*

*Green, outside and in.*

*The trees outside are early summer green.*

*Inside, her own pale reflection on the glass, washed in echoing green.*

*The trees are suited to temperate climes. But it no longer feels strange to be back in this deciduous place. On this not-so-Fallow Farm.*

*There is a flash of russet as a sort of sheepdog chases an imaginary squirrel across the lawn and up the stairs of the clapperboard cottage. The porch is new. It was rebuilt after the fire, and it contrasts with the rest of the house, which has weathered over three decades. Summer scorch alternating with frozen winters.*

*Em reads a book in a deckchair, in a wide brimmed hat and a pair of oversized shades, with something green – mint, no doubt – sticking up out of a tall glass. She holds a cigarette in a long holder between two forefingers while she turns the book pages with her thumb. How many times has Maddy asked her not to smoke around the baby? Em will simply argue that they are outdoors, that the wind is blowing away from the pram – she can't get used to calling it a stroller – curling the smoke up over the railing and off into the oaks and the maples beyond. She jiggles the stroller back and forth absentmindedly with her foot while she reads, and the tinkling from the chain tied to its hood reaches Maddy over the green lawn, and through the glass.*

*The baby-sized balangandan, a gift from Ernesto, is hung with charms -- a silver figa fist, Xangô's double axe, Oxossi's bow, Oxum's mirror. He'd covered all the bases. Em added a rabbit's foot on a key ring she pulled out of some drawer – her version of a good luck charm. She'd entered into the spirit of the orixás as best she could. Maddy added her lucky poker chip, the one with the hole in the middle, made for hanging. There was a patterned silver ball locket with soil in it which came, Ernesto said, from the terreiro garden. She wonders if Zé gathered it himself, weaving word spells for a child he had not yet seen?*

*The baby sleeps and feeds and watches the world with curious eyes. Eyes a particular shade of green. When he smiles at what he sees, his top lip folds into a little horizontal crease.*

*She'll take him to Brazil. When the smoke clears. When the paperwork is done. She hates paperwork. She should be up at the house now, sending reports, answering emails. But she can do it in her own sweet time. These days, she answers to no one.*

*It was paperwork that got her here – the paper she had almost left behind at the airport. The unopened envelope from her father, the one she was so scared of. She wonders whether it was one of those Freudian slips, those parapraxes of forgetfulness, that she left it at the pharmacy when she bought the test. She hadn't noticed it was missing. If that store assistant had not been so diligent, had not gone out of her way to track her down... From a name scrawled on the envelope, fed into a system, leading to a flight and a gate and a time.*

*Except that she didn't get on that flight. Not after she was reunited with her envelope, realised it was time to open it, and found that it contained the title deeds to Fallow Farm. In her name.*

*Right there and then, her future was decided.*

*She managed to get her suitcase just in time. Her poker savings bought her a flight to JFK. Em was delighted by the news.*

*Her aunt had asked no questions, for once, when the parcel of 'peppercorns' arrived from Brazil, not long after Maddy herself turned up. The seed sample she sent airmail from Brazil was small enough to pass under the official radar, but large enough to ascertain that this was, in fact, the rare subspecies of *Newbouldia*, extinct in its original Africa. Large enough to confirm that the seeds were viable, so that, once the proper permissions were in place, once it could be officially protected and propagated and preserved, it might be re-introduced there.*

*She could only imagine the look on Kirk's face when his parcel arrived in Cape Town. I know how much you love coffee, she had written on the note. I hope this doesn't keep you awake at night.*

*She heard via the grapevine that Kirk had resigned from the institute. He was working for a biotech company now, in their research department.*



*There are people from Kew on the case now, working to make the sample she sent them legal, retroactively. There are lawyers in Bahia and Brasilia drawing up contracts, there are ethnobotanists tracking Newbouldia Mundii's journey from the Ivory Coast to the coffeelands, from Guinea to Cachoeira. There are scientists testing the chemicals contained in the little star ship, looking for any miracle cures coded in its blueprint for root and bark and leaf.*

*They don't know about the small tree nursery she's set up here, in a makeshift greenhouse built over the charcoaled remains of an artist's studio. Row upon row of sapling Newbouldia mundii, within a few miles of the SeedCorp head office.*

*That's her own secret.*

*As is the stand of trees next to a rocky river near Cachoeira. They would not be able to find those, not without the help of the candomblé community. Not without Zé. Or even Fernando.*

*Her body signals feeding time an instant before the long wail reaches her from the other side of the glass. Vavi is waiting for her outside the greenhouse, ready to escort her to his other charge. She closes the greenhouse door on the fledgling trees. Perhaps she'll plant them out in a long line along her driveway, to protect the little prince that lives here now. They would grow along with him, putting down roots for him here, no matter where else he might wander, in his time.*

*She'll take him to Cape Town one day, to meet his godmother Marilese, and Vavi's cousins. She'll bid him look closely at the tiniest fynbos flowers, watch his eyes open wide as he feels the shock of the icy sea for the first time.*

*But Brazil first. He has family there.*

*She picks up her child and breathes in the smell that only she can fully know, milky and primal, acid and alkaline, and thinks about the day she'll introduce him to his father. In a garden of green. And many other colours.*

*She'll remember to say a silent thanks to Exu first, for a safe journey.*

*What else is a girl with a death wish to do, when she finds she cares rather too much about life?*

A note on pronunciation:

Portuguese words are indicated throughout in italics.

Some pronunciation basics will help readers internalise the flow and sounds of some of the more common words in this manuscript.

- Double r, as in '*terreiro*', is pronounced as an 'h', thus: te-hay-row
- X, as in '*Orixá*' is pronounced 'sh', thus: or-ish-ah
- An acute accent over a vowel denotes an emphasis on that vowel/syllable. In the example above, the emphasis is on the last syllable. Or-ish-*aah*
- The cedilha is used to denote a soft c, as in '*cachaça*', thus: ca-sha-sa

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Simon Winchester, *Krakatoa – The Day the World Exploded* (Penguin, 2004); A.S. Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World – The Gifford Lectures 1927* (The Macmillan Company, 1928); Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia* (Picador, 2007); Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (Harper Collins, 1965); Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Picador Africa, 2004); Jorge Amado, *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* (Serpent's Tail, 1986); Vandana Shiva, 'The Future of Food and Seed: Justice, Sustainability and Peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century', her keynote address to the 2009 Organicology Conference in Portland, Oregon, on February 28, 2009.

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Quotes from Elizabeth Bishop's poems include lines from: 'The Weed', 'Santarém', 'One Art', 'Night City', 'The Waiting Room', 'Crusoe in England' and 'Brazil, January 1, 1502', all from *The Complete Poems 1927 - 1979* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984). The descriptions of Sammy the toucan are from *Elizabeth Bishop, One Art – The Selected Letters*, Edited by Robert Giroux (Chatto & Windus 1994). Quotes from Elizabeth Bishop's correspondence come from Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (University of California Press, 1993) and *Words in Air – The Complete*

*Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell*, Edited by Thomas Travisano (Farrar, Straus Giroux, 2008).

Song lines are by: Sarah McLaughlan, 'Building a Mystery' from *Surfacing* (Arista Records, 1997); Bonnie 'Prince' Billy, 'You Will Miss Me When I Burn' from *Sings Greatest Palace Music* (Drag City, 2004); Gal Costa, 'E d'Oxum' from *Brasil: A Century of Song, Vol. 4: MPB - Musica Popular Brasileira* (Blue Jackel, 1995); Beck 'Tropicalia' from *Mutations* (Geffen, 1998); Patsy Cline, 'Wayward Wind' from *Patsy Cline Showcase* (Decca, 1961); Sinead O'Connor, 'Feel So Different' from *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got* (Ensign/Chrysalis, 1990).

On page 152 I have quoted a line from Pablo Neruda, 'Tonight I Can Write' from *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (Jonathan Cape, 1975).

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